

A BODY OF WORK:
BUILDING SELF AND SOCIETY AT STALIN'S WHITE SEA-BALTIC CANAL

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The dissertation concerns the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal (*Belomorsko-Baltiskii Kanal imeni Stalina*), one of the most significant and infamous forced-labor projects of Soviet Russia. In just twenty months from 1931-1933, political and criminal prisoners built a 227-kilometer-long canal in extreme environmental conditions, without the help of any modern equipment. This early Gulag project differed greatly from others in its broad use of art and creativity as a motivational and propagandistic tool. Prisoners performed in *agitbrigady* (agitational brigades), participated in camp-wide competitions of poetry and prose, worked as journalists at the camp newspaper *Perekovka*, and attended theatrical performances completely produced by fellow prisoners. Art, in turn, not only served as entertainment but also had the capacity to transform human beings through the ideological process of *perekvovka* (re-forging), which supposedly re-fashioned wayward criminals into productive members of Soviet society. Through extensive use of archival documents, the dissertation aims to highlight the experience of criminal prisoners in the Gulag, a long understudied demographic of the Soviet prison camp system.

Self and society were both re-created at the Belomorkanal with the help of aesthetic products, and what was begun as a laboratory for Soviet culture becomes a utopian vision. This dystopian utopia was riddled by the paradoxes surrounding it—in an environment of supposed re-birth and creation there was ubiquitous death and destruction. This explains the important

roles that collage, montage, and assemblage play as artistic styles and metaphorical concepts. Collage exemplifies the shredding of the world in order to create a new, unified whole; montage in film and photography promises the creation of non-existent—and idealized—worlds; assemblage, in its three-dimensionality, is used in contemporary artworks about the Canal and can be understood metaphorically, with the Canal's various bits of lock, dam, and dike pieced together and subsequently stitched with other waterways. From the outset, the significance of the Belomorkanal was seen within the larger industrial context of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, and the project has important cultural significance not only for the history of the Gulag but also for the study of Stalinism and the Soviet Union as a whole.

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PREFACE

Their [survivors'] testimony reveals a world ruled by death, but also a world of actual living conditions, of ways of life, which are the basis and achievement of life in extremity.

—Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor*

The poor and middle peasants were all working with a furious zeal for life, as though they were seeking eternal salvation in the abyss of the foundation pit.

—Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*

I am accustomed to people's reactions when I tell them I research the Gulag, the vast network of prison camps that stretched across the Soviet Union for much of the twentieth century. More often than not, I am met by furrowed brows and quizzical expressions: "That must be really depressing," and "Why would you want to immerse yourself in such tragedy?" or "Couldn't you have chosen a topic that is a little more light-hearted?" While the questions are plentiful, the idea is the same: to devote oneself to a difficult, gruesome topic—especially when it is not one's own national history—seems strange and inexplicable. In the face of such recurring exclamations of surprise, I remember that there is much more to this story than death counts, torture practices, and back-breaking labor. Amidst a landscape of death, life persists, and it is in service to the victims of the Gulag to remember not only that they died but how they lived. Horrific statistics often anesthetize the mind to the true scope of tragedy; as mere numbers, the reality of individual experience cannot be brought into relief and the human element is lost. An

investigation of the complex cultural processes at work at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal¹—both the regime's ideology and the prisoners' responses—makes the story of the Gulag more vivid and accessible for public discussion.

The ability to withstand unbelievably difficult circumstances offers incredible insight into the human will to live. At the White Sea-Baltic Canal certain prisoners did not merely survive, but somehow found a way to continue living by writing poetry, performing plays, and learning languages. Some inmates produced art works after splitting apart solid rock with picks and axes during a ten-hour, physically exhausting day of work. Others took advantage of the contact with new, foreign populations to further their own research. Still other prisoners found ingenious ways to evade authorities. The Gulag, in turn, became a foundry for inventions, and a creative spirit permeated life behind barbed wire.

Thomas Lahusen writes, "People, their deeds and works, are remembered by History only if they succeed as story."² For too long, the stories of the prisoners who constructed Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal have been forgotten; stories of women forced into prostitution at an early age to feed their siblings, stories of men who turn to crime because they are heartbroken over the loss of a spouse, stories of criminals who practiced their trade with pride and flair before being imprisoned. While the equally interesting and complex story of the construction of the Canal itself has been repeated and analyzed many times, the human faces behind—or beneath—the Canal, many of whom perished in the building process, have been lost. The present work attempts to rectify this oversight by foregrounding the individual stories of the people who built

¹ While the official, full name of the Canal is Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, or *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina*, Belomorkanal will be used as a shorter term referring to the project. There are several additional ways to refer to the Canal: BBK, an acronym for *Belomorkso-Baltiiskii kanal*; Belomorstroï, which refers specifically to the construction of the Canal; and BelBaltLag, which refers to the camp site where the prisoners lived.

² Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997). 2.

the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Once their narratives have been established, they can be placed within the wider context of non-prisoner cultural representations of the Canal as well as within the fabric of Soviet society itself. In this way, these drowned voices, often complex and contradictory, can live again.

* * *

Monumental change swept the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. The implementation of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan—completed, symbolically, in four years, from 1928-1932—necessitated a massive reconfiguration of the country's economy and culture. Everything was to be remade: society, industry, and even people. The Belomorkanal³ served as a kind of laboratory where this reformation of Soviet society could be tested. The most important penal philosophy at the camp was the idea of *perekovka*, or re-forging, which maintained that the moralizing power of physical labor could transform wayward criminals into upstanding Soviet citizens.

The reshaping of man and landscape occurred simultaneously at the site of the labor camp, with the war against nature and the battle for human psyches echoing each other. For both people and place, such a dramatic transformation was difficult. The challenges of the project were legitimately enormous: a mostly untrained work force composed mostly of criminals, a remote location with no infrastructure, a dearth of materials, virtually no mechanized equipment or tools—all in light of the command from above to complete the entire project cheaply and in under two years. Art, a most surprising bedfellow, would become the motivator behind the sweat and blood literally poured into the project. Art took multiple forms—poetry and short stories, plays and paintings, mobile agitational performance groups (*agitbrigady*) as well as

³ As mentioned in the first footnote, Belomorkanal will be used as an abbreviation for Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, or *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina*.

formal theater productions. The displacement of self into a cultural arena and the escape that creative inspiration provided were vital to the completion of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

It eventually becomes clear that the reconstruction of humans and the taming of nature cannot be separated from one another; instead, they exist in dialogic conversation, constantly implying and reinforcing each other. Both self and society were violently built at the Canal according to Stalin's grand design, and the brutality inherent in the project is reflected in art emerging from the Canal experience. Creativity takes on a raw, physical quality and art cannot be separated from the notion of violence. This characteristic in part explains the important role of collage (in addition to montage and assemblage) as both technique and metaphor in the present research. A style that reached its apogee as a direct consequence of the aggressive, transformational force of industrialization, collage embodies a violent destruction and subsequent re-formulation of the world—one way in which art and culture can express the dizzying, and life-altering, speed of modernization. Collage performs a similar function at the camp site. The construction of the Canal is an industrial project that will change the face of the economy, nature, and especially people.

Yet at the heart of the Canal's construction was an unavoidable paradox: construction was meant to take place in an atmosphere of annihilation; people were to be re-made as they were destroyed. This absurdity reverberates throughout the entirety of the project and becomes unavoidable in any analysis of its legacy. It seemed as if the world was turned upside down or inside out on the banks of the Belomorkanal: criminals, including former rapists and murderers, were given positions of authority; incarcerated prisoners were responsible for developing hydro-technical designs for what was intended to be a grand industrial achievement; artistic performances accompanied hard physical labor. Upon closer inspection, such seemingly

impossible incongruities are a testament to Soviet culture—in particular Stalinist culture—itsself, in which mathematic rules were transformed, time was pushed forward, and history was re-written. A glorious façade often disguised sinister and complex contents. Nevertheless, such an order of things should not preclude the possibility of analysis, as Stalinism remains a fertile ground for new research and fresh approaches to its many complexities.

1.0 OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

For me, the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction is a second homeland.

–Maksim Gor'kii, ed., et al, *The History of the Construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal*⁴

How do you define official and unofficial? All that depends on your point of view. All that, Nikanor Ivanovich, is arbitrary and relative. Today I'm unofficial, but tomorrow I might be official! And vice versa, of course, or even something worse.

–Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*⁵

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Stalina*), completed in just twenty months from 1931-1933, remains one of the most significant and infamous forced-labor projects in Soviet Russia. This is due, in large part, to the complexity of cultural-historical narratives surrounding its construction: the project represents an important

⁴ «Для меня, Беломорстрой – вторая родина.» Averbakh, L., Firin, S., and M. Gor'kii, eds., *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Stalina: Istorii stroitel'stva* (OGIZ, 1934), 428. The 1998 re-printed version of the *Istorii stroitel'stva* is used in this and all subsequent citations. Most of the original copies of the monograph were destroyed or hidden after the official prohibition of the text three years after its original publication. Original copies of the manuscript are also contained housed at the GARF archive in Moscow, Russia.

⁵ «Что такое официальное лицо или неофициальное? Все это зависит от того, с такой точки зрения смотреть на предмет. Все это, Никанор Иванович, зыбко и условно. Сегодня я неофициальное лицо, а завтра, глядишь, официальное! А бывает и наоборот, и еще как бывает.» Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, trans. Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor (NY: Vintage, 1996), 79, with modification by author. M. A. Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita* (Moscow: Slovo, 2000), 434.

chapter in the overall history of the Gulag as the first large construction project to use forced labor,⁶ wedged ideologically between Solovki and the construction of the Moscow-Volga Canal;⁷ its propaganda fuses art and work to an unprecedented degree in the creation of motivational tools; the building of the Canal is memorialized in numerous artistic endeavors both during and after its completion; the ideological backbone of the project, *perekovka* (re-forging), has important parallels with larger Soviet societal trends; and traces of the Belomorkanal still exist in the material culture of contemporary Russia. In its many roles, the White Sea-Baltic Canal is presented in various prisoner and non-prisoner sources as a university, a country, a family, a lover, a factory—but rarely as a prison.

Although the topic is clearly a historical one, the present research has an interdisciplinary focus, concentrating on the literary, artistic, and cultural footprints of the Canal while relating them to broader cultural trends. This Gulag project differs greatly from most others in its extensive examination of art and creativity as a motivational and propagandistic tool. Prisoners performed in *agitbrigady* (agitational brigades), participated in camp-wide competitions in poetry and prose, worked as journalists at the camp newspaper, and attended theatrical performances completely produced by fellow prisoners. The *udarniki*, or shock-workers (the laborers with the highest work output), on the Canal existed almost as a separate social class; countless artistic works were written in their honor, and they received a host of special privileges. These privileges were often cultural ones, with the *udarniki* treated to orchestral accompaniment during work and given access to special libraries and cultural centers. The

⁶ For the important influence of the White Sea-Baltic Canal in the overall history and development of the Gulag, see Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, eds., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2003).

⁷ The phrase “wedged ideologically” is here meant to underscore the fact that—while being different from these other projects—the Belomorkanal both borrowed from the experience at Solovki and influenced the one at the Moscow-Volga Canal. Many prisoners went from Solovki to the the Canal construction, just as many continued on to Dmitlag to work on the Moscow-Volga Canal.

Kul'turno-vospitatel'nyi otдел (Cultural-Educational Department), or KVO, was specifically responsible for the implementation of cultural and artistic projects on the Canal as well as for the *perekovka*, or re-forging, of prisoners into productive members of society. Art, therefore, served as both entertainment and reward, and it supposedly had the capacity to transform human beings.

Not only were prisoners active members in creative projects, but the Canal itself was also memorialized in an artistic fashion. Most notable is the literary work *The History of the Construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal* (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva*, 1934)—the propagandistic bible of the Canal's construction—written collectively by well-known authors including Vladimir Kataev, Boris Pil'niak, Viktor Shklovskii, and Mikhail Zoshchenko, and organized by the writer Maksim Gor'kii. This tome, indispensable to understanding the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the Canal, will subsequently be referred to as the *History of the Construction* (*Istoriia stroitel'stva*).⁸

Gor'kii was an essential figure both in terms of the literary representation of the Canal and more broadly as a spokesperson for the status of Soviet literature in the 1930s. In the atmosphere of industrialization promoted by the first Five-Year Plan, literature was often portrayed as a product of labor (which Gor'kii himself reinforced with his stringent work ethic), and writers as “engineers of the human soul.”⁹ The construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal

⁸ The *History of the Construction* has been printed four times. The first run of just 4,000 copies was specifically for delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress in January 1934. The next run was larger (80,000 copies, also in 1934) and with an embossed portrait of Stalin; the subsequent run of 30,000 copies was printed in 1935 without the Stalin cover. The most recent re-issuing of the book in 1998 will be the version used throughout the dissertation; there is little variation between the editions. This most recent edition most faithfully attempts to re-create the first editions, including Mikhail Kozakov's name as one of the authors in the collective; his name had disappeared from the 1935 edition without any explanation. All translations from this work into English are mine.

⁹ The writer Zelinskii recalls the October 1932 meeting of writers at Gor'kii's house with Stalin saying the following, «Есть разное производство: артиллерии, автомобилей, машин. Вы тоже производите «товар», «вещь», «продукцию». Очень нужна нам вещь. Интересную вещь. Души людей. Тоже очень важное «производство». Очень важное «производство» души людей. Вы инженеры человеческих душ.» [“There are different types of production: artillery, automobiles, machines. You also produce a good, an item, a product. A very

was an appropriate testing ground for experimentation with this new understanding of aesthetic capability—a place where creativity and labor truly went hand in hand. The active and often violent process of *perekovka* transformed a criminal into a productive Soviet citizen, destroying his past life in order to create a new socialist self. The process of identity formation, therefore, occurred at the very site of the labor camp, and the act of self-narration became a crucial component in the attempt to define one’s “new” persona. The import of the physical body and the violence of the camp experience had a profound impact on creative work produced both by and about the camp, and the very act of inspiration could be an aggressive one.

Most importantly, this project will foreground the experience of criminal prisoners at the Canal.¹⁰ Political prisoners have long been favored in scholarly research, since the availability of resources regarding this group is much greater; these prisoners often corresponded with family members, wrote memoirs, or participated in interviews, whereas criminal prisoners were frequently illiterate or were not necessarily interested in leaving behind a record of their experiences. The legacy of criminal prisoners, therefore, still needs to be fully addressed, especially since this group represents a much larger portion of the overall Gulag population.¹¹ Given the fact that for the most part only criminal prisoners were allowed to undergo the transformative process of *perekovka*¹² at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, there actually exists a

necessary thing. An interesting thing. The souls of people. This is also a very important product. The production of human souls is very important. You are engineers of people’s souls.”] RGALI, f. 1604, op. 1, d. 21, l. 32.

¹⁰ The distinction between criminal and political prisoners is defined here by their sentences. Those charged with counter-revolutionary activity—any of the *punkty* contained in article 58—are considered political prisoners. Prisoners charged under any other article are counted here as criminal prisoners.

¹¹ In 1934, only .7 percent of the camp population had higher education and in 1937-38—the years of the Great Terror—political prisoners comprised only 12-18 percent of the prisoner population. During Stalin’s reign, political prisoners never accounted for more than a third of all prisoners, and there were more often much fewer than this. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag*, 292.

¹² In general, only criminal prisoners were allowed to participate in cultural-educational work, taking up roles as *vospitateli* (educators), performers in *agitbrigady* (agitational brigades), journalists at the camp newspaper *Perekovka*, and leaders of *trudkollektivy* (work collectives). There were, however, exceptions, and prisoners sentenced under article 58 who exemplified good behavior and were deemed politically safe were allowed—albeit

larger body of archival materials regarding the criminal population at the Belomorkanal. The criminals were the target of a massive propaganda campaign: they were taught to read and write, they enrolled in technical training programs, they were encouraged to compose their autobiographies, and they participated in camp-wide literary competitions. Although certainly not all of the criminal population partook in these endeavors, all the *udarniki* (shock-workers) were encouraged by the KVO to take part in such activities.

In this unusual atmosphere, where people of various nationalities, ethnicities, and criminal backgrounds were joined together in a massive construction project in the far reaches of isolated Karelia, creativity took on the form of labor just as the work itself was often cast in artistic terms. Physical labor and artistic inspiration became inextricably connected, and the artistic narratives written at and about the Canal ultimately have a violent physicality in their tone. The *History of the Construction* portrays the Canal not merely as a construction project, but as *tvorchestvo* (creation), with the camp at times described sarcastically as a “cultured prison, a boarding house.”¹³ The prisoner Vladimir Kavchin aptly describes this hybridity in a poem submitted to the camp newspaper *Perekovka* for a literary competition, “I with the pen, you with the shovel—together we built the canal.”¹⁴ In addition, the violent, aggressive nature of the criminal lifestyle lends itself easily to a similar expressiveness in art. The criminals, in turn, often interpret their past occupations as highly artistic; in order to be a successful pickpocket or triumphant thief, you have to be creative and thoughtful.¹⁵

rarely—to also participate in these activities. See V. G. Makurov, ed., *Gulag v Karelii: sbornik dokumentov i materialov 1930-1941* (Petrozavodsk: RAN, 1992), 14.

¹³ «— Культурная тюрьма, пансион, — говорил кто-то язвительно.» L. Averbakh, et al., 97.

¹⁴ «Я пером, а ты лопатой / оба строили мы канал.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 34, l. 100.

¹⁵ This topic—the artistic nature of crime—will be discussed at length in the second chapter.

Alongside the focus on the criminal population and the exploration of the often violent connection between art and labor, this research will also offer an unprecedented model of the Gulag itself. While there has recently been an increasing amount of historical research concerning the Soviet prison camp system,¹⁶ there is still the possibility for fresh interpretations and new models. The “classic” of Gulag literature, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag GULAG*, 1973-75), interprets the camps as islands, completely separated from society and operating by their own rules. Marina Goldovskaia’s documentary film *Vlast’ Solovetskaia* (*Solovki Power*, 1988), portrays a similar notion of the Gulag, since interviewees recall the camp site as a type of country, where Solovetsky—and not Soviet—power was in force. This model has been adapted by researchers such as Anne Applebaum, who presents the Gulag as a type of miniature prison within the larger prison, or “bol’shaia zona” of the Soviet Union,¹⁷ an idea that is common among camp prisoners themselves. This model, however, still presents the Gulag as somehow separate from the rest of Soviet society, even if both spaces are analogously oppressive. More recent analyses have offered yet another point of view—that the Gulag is porous and malleable and not necessarily separate at all from larger Soviet society.¹⁸ Given the many releases of prisoners, camp culture inevitably interacts with,

¹⁶ A few such notable and influential titles to recently appear regarding the history of the Gulag include: Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: a History* (NY: Doubleday, 2003); Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System 1917-1934* (Lexington, KY: U P of Kentucky, 1993); G. M. Ivanova, *Gulag v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva* (Moscow: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 1997); Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004); and document collections such as: A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morkurov, eds., *Stalinskie stroiki GULAGA 1930-1953* (Moscow: Materik, 2005); V. G. Makurov, *GULag v Karelii. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov 1930-1941*, (Petrozavodsk: RAN, 1992).

¹⁷ Applebaum, xxix.

¹⁸ See, for example, Steven A. Barnes, “‘In a Manner Befitting Soviet Citizens’: An Uprising in the Post-Stalin Gulag,” *Slavic Review* 64 (2005): 823-50.

and perhaps even influences, Soviet culture at large.¹⁹ In addition, the often porous boundaries of the Gulag allow for mingling between incarcerated convicts and free citizens.²⁰

While these new interpretations are highly researched and well-founded, I would like to offer a somewhat different model for the Gulag that is related specifically to cultural production: that of the laboratory.²¹ Rather than a separate space, a space-within-a-space, or a continuous space, the Gulag as represented by the Belomorkanal produces a revolutionary, experimental, forward-thinking laboratory where ideological constructs could be explored in a zone separate from the rest of society. This idea is not meant to imply that the White Sea-Baltic Canal is revolutionary in a positive sense; given the high mortality rate and unbelievable cruelty at the Canal, it would be misguided to make such a statement.²² Instead, it is important to understand how the administration experimented with concepts at the Belomorkanal that would later permeate socialist society as a whole, and also how pre-existing ideals of the Soviet experience were enacted there with an intensified force. Some of these phenomena, which will be explored at length in the course of the dissertation, include the birth of socialist realism, the concept of the *novyi chelovek* (New Man), Stalin's Cultural Revolution, and the trope of "war against nature." All of these very broad and highly significant historical-cultural trends find a home on the banks of the Belomorkanal in an exaggerated or concentrated format, and at times even predate their

¹⁹ Arch J. Getty, Gabor T. Ritterspoon and Viktor N. Zemskov. "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 1017-49.

²⁰ Alan Barenberg, "From Prison Camp to Mining Town: The Gulag and Its Legacy in Vorkuta, 1938-65" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

²¹ The notion of Gulag as laboratory is not an entirely new one, although here it will be used in a more expansive sense. Hans Günther addresses the idea of the laboratory in terms of *perekovka* in his article "Der Bau des Weißmeerkanaals als Laboratorium des neuen Menschen," *Bücher haben ihre Geschichte*, eds. Petra Josting and Jan Wirsing (Hildesheim: Olms, 1996). In addition, accounts of the Gulag from different time periods and in different countries address the notion; in the film *Beyond Torture: The Gulag of Pitetsi*, Romania the prison in Pitetsi, Romania is portrayed as a laboratory in an even more scientific sense, as the infamously cruel authorities engage in drugging and torture, using the human inmates as "experiments" for their efforts of "re-education." Alan Hartwick, dir., 2007.

²² For a particularly disturbing account of death and cruelty on the White Sea-Baltic Canal, see Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (NY: Picador, 2007), 114.

appearances in Soviet society. Although this new conception of the Gulag would not necessarily apply to all prisons within the very diverse Soviet camp system, it is nevertheless helpful in understanding both prison life and Soviet society in a fresh way.

The present research is indebted to the work of many previous scholars, both historians and literary specialists. The reformulation of Stalinism by Sheila Fitzpatrick has undoubtedly influenced my thinking and approach,²³ and recent work by Stephen Kotkin²⁴ has allowed me to see parallels between the White Sea-Baltic Canal and other, not entirely prisoner-populated, construction projects. Jochen Hellbeck, with his work on Stalinist-era diaries and Soviet subjectivity, has informed my work in crucial ways by offering a new model of socialist dedication and highlighting the role of the personal, individual narrative.²⁵ Orlando Figes's recent monograph explores a somewhat different view of Soviet subjectivity, lessening the emphasis on the Stalinist desire for self-improvement, which makes an interesting comparison for the present research.²⁶ In terms of literary scholarship, Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* and Karen McCauley's article "Production Literature and the Industrial Imagination" have served as important touchstones.²⁷ Finally, Boris Groys and Alexei Yurchak's work have both helped me to formulate my ideas in a larger cultural context.²⁸ Groys, with his reconfigured notion of the avant-garde's connection to Stalinism, and Yurchak, with his deconstruction of the many dyads we use to understand Soviet culture, both bring fresh ideas and

²³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (NY: Oxford UP, 1999).

²⁴ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: U California P, 1995).

²⁵ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006).

²⁶ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (NY: Picador, 2007).

²⁷ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) and Karen A. McCauley, "Production Literature and the Industrial Imagination" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 42 (1998): 444-66.

²⁸ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) and Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, until It Was No More* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006).

interpretations to an era that has often been plagued by assumptions and static models of interpretation.

In addition to works that have facilitated my formulation of a theoretical framework, there is also a substantial body of research that concerns specifically the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal. Most notable is Cynthia Ruder's monograph *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*,²⁹ which provided the original inspiration for my work on the subject. Ioakhim Klein's recent article, "Belomorkanal: Literatura i propaganda v stalinskoe vremia," is another outstanding interpretation of the cultural artifacts surrounding the Belomor project.³⁰ From a more historical point of view, Nick Baron's and Ivan Chukhin's research provide excellent analyses.³¹ Despite the availability of texts regarding Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, the present project offers an original, innovative approach. Unlike the existing historical sources, it will focus exclusively on the art and culture surrounding the building of the Canal; unlike the available literary sources, it will privilege the prisoners' contributions to the body of texts regarding the Belomorkanal. Both Ruder and Klein make the officially-sanctioned, collectively-written tome *History of the Construction* their central focus, while also including discussions of other non-prisoner produced texts, such as Aleksandr Pogodin's play *Aristokraty* (*The Aristocrats*, 1936). Although Ruder does include some discussion of prisoner memoirs, they are mostly contributions from political prisoners. The present research will include an in-depth analysis of criminal prisoners' texts: their autobiographies, poetry, plays and short stories. The role of the camp newspaper *Perekovka* and the psychological tools used as motivators for

²⁹ Cynthia Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998). See in particular pages 86-153 for Ruder's analysis of the *History of the Construction*.

³⁰ Ioakhim Klein, "Belomorkanal: Literatura i propaganda v stalinskoe vremia," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 71 (2005): 231-62.

³¹ Nick Baron, "Conflict and Complicity: The Expansion of the Karelian Gulag, 1923-1933," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 42 (2001): 615-48 and Ivan Chukhin, *Kanaloarmeitsy* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1990).

working on the Canal will be investigated. These texts will in turn be analyzed alongside non-prisoner works and both groups will be related to Soviet society as a whole. It is crucial, however, to begin with the criminal prisoners' personal experiences, highlighting this fundamental component of the overall project. It is precisely this focus that separates the current project from previous research on the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The impetus to build a waterway connecting the White and Baltic Seas has a long history. In the second half of the sixteenth century, mercantile ties were already established between Western Europe and Russia, and in 1584 the Karelian city of Arkhangel'sk was founded as a trading port. English explorers were the first to propose a canal in order to open Moscow to northern trading routes.³² The Russia Company, the major English shipping company to trade with Russia, understood the need for an uninterrupted waterway in northern Russia so as to shorten their trade route and make it less dangerous.³³ It was not until Peter the Great, however, that the idea gained more credence; in July of 1693, Peter made an arduous voyage by land and sea to Arkhangel'sk and realized the necessity of establishing an independent Russian fleet, given the vast number of foreigners in northern Russia. He traveled on what became known as the *Osudareva doroga*, or the Tsar's road, dragging his newly built fleet of ships overland from the White Sea to the Baltic Sea, where there was as yet no waterway.³⁴ The Tsar's Road would eventually become the pathway of the White Sea-Baltic Canal; Mikhail Privshin's 1957 novel

³² Baron, 636.

³³ T. S. Willan, *The Early History of the Russia Company* (NY: Augustus M. Kelley, 1956). 48-49, 67.

³⁴ Konstantin Gnetnev, *Kanal: Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal 1933-2003* (Petrozavodsk: PetroPress, 2003), 6-10.

The Tsar's Road (Osudareva doroga), although focusing on the time period of Peter the Great, also manages to offer oblique commentary on the egregious power, suffering, and loss of human life at the White Sea-Baltic Canal as a parallel example. Even before the actual construction of the Canal, therefore, physical hardship and injustice had marred the natural landscape. Thousands of people traveled the Tsar's Road in August 1702 during the Great Northern War in the horrible conditions of penal servitude; as one participant recalls, "There were three doctors on the entire expedition. The first—Vodka. The second—the Lash. The third—Death, that good aunt."³⁵ These extreme conditions were not so different from what would become life at BelBaltLag (the name of the OGPU camp for the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal).

The first quarter of the nineteenth century began with a genuine battle for the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and in February 1827 the fisherman and supplier Fedor Antonov delivered a letter to the Karelian minister, asking for a canal to be built. Local residents saw promise in the potential construction project, hoping that a waterway connecting the Karelian region with central Russia would end their economic and social isolation. Various parties submitted no fewer than fifteen proposals for such a project, but the government cited lack of funds and inappropriate timing as reasons for rejecting them. In 1868-69 private companies put together their own funding in light of the state's inaction, but they were not able to raise enough money for the completion of a waterway. Finally, on 8 March 1886, the government reacted positively to the idea of the waterway, and they began expeditions to explore the economic impact and feasibility of developing a canal, eventually publishing the results of the survey.³⁶ Despite the growing discussion of a White Sea-Baltic Canal in 1900-01,³⁷ with the

³⁵ «...А лекарей на всю экспедицию трое. Один – Водка. Второй – Плетка. Да третий – смерть, добрая тетка.» Chukhin, *Kanaloarmeitsy*, 9.

³⁶ Gnetnev, 11-16.

subsequent outbreak of World War I and the building of the Murmansk railroad in 1915 both underscoring the strategic and technical advantages of such a project, the canal was never begun in Tsarist Russia.³⁸

The Canal project gained popularity after the 1917 revolution, as it assumed the potential for Soviet Russia to highlight the technical progress of the newly socialist country; what was projected for hundreds of years in Tsarist Russia, as Soviet officials would claim, was realized in just twenty months, thanks to the foresight of Stalin and the efficiency of socialist labor. On 5 May 1930, the Politburo approved a resolution that would finally allow work to begin on the project; in the initial plan, the Canal was divided into two sections: southern and northern. The southern section was to be built to a depth of eighteen feet and completed in two years, with work beginning in 1931; the northern section, between Lake Onega and the White Sea, was to be handled by the OGPU, with costs minimized, given the potential exploitation of prison labor.³⁹ Stalin himself, in a message to V. M. Molotov, suggested the use of prisoner labor in order to cut costs after the 5 May presentation of the project.⁴⁰ After several further decrees, with additional revisions to the plan and the organization of operating and administrative committees for Belomorstoi (the Belomor Construction), authorities approved the work plan in its final form on 18 February 1931. The new plan reduced the depth of the Canal to 10-12 feet in order to minimize costs,⁴¹ set the completion date as no later than the end of 1932 and estimated a total cost of 60-70 million rubles for the project.⁴² In November 1931 work officially began on the

³⁷ The *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Vodnyi Put'* project is shown at the Paris Exposition in 1900, where it wins a gold medal. Gnetnev, 17.

³⁸ Ibid, 18.

³⁹ Baron, 639.

⁴⁰ Kokurin and Morkurov, eds., 30-31.

⁴¹ This is a disastrous amendment to the plans for the Canal's construction, as the completed waterway is only deep enough to allow the passage of barges and tourist boats, severely limiting the economic capabilities of the Canal.

⁴² Ibid, 32.

Canal, and Genrikh Iagoda, head of the OGPU, took control of the project, signing the official decree in which other heads of the project are enumerated: Lazar Kogan (director of the Belomor construction project), Iakov Rapoport (assistant director of the Belomor project), and Nefteli Frenkel' (director of labor) were among the most visible supervisors on the Canal. On 28 May 1933 the ship *The Chekist* sailed through the waterway, marking the first navigation of the Canal, even as work on the project was still being finished.⁴³ On 2 August 1933 Viacheslav Molotov signed a decree announcing the official opening of the Canal, and on 4 August 1933 the Soviet Union awarded various prizes and honors to the best officials, engineers, and workers on the Canal.⁴⁴

A brief survey of the history of interest in building a White-Baltic Sea waterway makes it possible to draw parallels between the Tsarist and Soviet-era ambitions. The documented suggestions for the project in the 1800s include the notion of “civilizing” the wild reaches of Karelia, and argue that the connection of northern Russia to its central portion would allow money and people to flood into the region, introducing “culture” into the remote area.⁴⁵ This remained one of the key ideological motivators during the construction of the Canal in the 1930s; in an August 1933 memo signed by V. M. Molotov, he notes the importance of the “kolonizatsiia kraia” (“colonization of the area”) and the increase of the population that should occur with the influx of workers.⁴⁶ Both the rehabilitation of prisoners and the stimulation of economic activity in the far North “would serve to transmit Soviet civilisation to the frontier.”⁴⁷ The importation of a massive workforce to a sparsely-inhabited area also allowed for the potential of freed

⁴³ Ibid, 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Gnetnev, 13.

⁴⁶ Kokurin and Morkurov, eds., 36.

⁴⁷ Baron, 637.

prisoners to remain in the region and build the population base. The grand Soviet project of the “war against nature” (*bor'ba s prirodoi*), in which the physical landscape was to be harnessed and tamed with the introduction of human achievements and technology, exemplified the desire to wrest wild Karelia from the primordial grip of nature. The inherently violent, aggressive rhetoric promoted to accompany such a battle against the natural world allows for the introduction of war-like diction in many of the texts about the Canal—perhaps the most obvious example is the creation of the new word *kanaloarmeets* (canal-army soldier) as the name given to the prisoners who worked on the Canal. In addition, prisoners and authorities alike used the ubiquitous and highly popular word *shturm* (assault) for the intense work drive to finish the Canal. Authorities encouraged the prisoners to tap into an aggressive, war-like mentality in order to complete the seemingly impossible task of building a 227-kilometer long Canal in only twenty months.

Closely connected to the idea of the “war against nature” is the changing map, as cartography offers proof of the human progress made in bending nature to its will. The map, therefore, is highly prevalent in cultural artifacts regarding the White Sea-Baltic Canal. The *History of the Construction* opens with a map, the image second only to Stalin, and the commemorative Canal issue of the monthly glossy magazine *USSR under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*) features a map on the cover as well as several others within its pages. The infamous Belomorkanal *papirosy* (cigarettes) show the well-recognized image of the map on its packaging, along with its sister-in-sin product, Belomorkanal vodka (Figures 1 and 2).⁴⁸ The ability of the

⁴⁸ For a more detailed explanation and analysis of Belomorkanal products, see Chapter Four.



Figure 1: Belomorkanal cigarette package. Photograph by author.



Figure 2: Belomorkanal vodka bottle. Photograph by author.

Soviet Union physically to change the map, permanently altering the natural environment, is a source of ideological pride because it offers highly visible evidence of socialist ambition. At the famous October 1932 meeting of Soviet writers (with Stalin in attendance) at Gor'kii's home, the alleged “father” of socialist realism makes it clear that the Belomorkanal is a great achievement precisely because it redrew the map: “Even geography is changing. Here is the Belomor Canal.

This is already a change in geography.”⁴⁹ Early in the *History of the Construction*, the *nachal'niki* (bosses) look at the map and marvel at how all the locks, dams, and dikes are as yet simply on paper, wondering how the achievement of the project will be possible.⁵⁰ Later, after the Canal's completion, Comrade Rapoport gestures to the newly-created map as he underscores the connection between Soviet greatness and the completion of the project, “From time immemorial conceived, but only socialism could complete the path, newly and widely, through the northern waters in the Baltic.”⁵¹ Significantly, the book ends with a map of the Moscow-Volga Canal, the next project that is to carve out Soviet domination on the physical landscape, with many former Belomorkanal prisoners and officials there to help complete the task.⁵²

This Soviet obsession with mapping, of course, is not exclusive to the White Sea-Baltic Canal project. Moscow was the center of the utopian desire to build a new socialist world, with city maps in 1935 depicting not buildings that had already been completed, but, rather, the construction projects that would be finished ten years hence.⁵³ Despite the fact that this changing of the map is clearly due to human endeavor, at times the *History of the Construction* presents the creation of the Canal in a naturalized manner: “The dikes went down under the water, everything was lodged in place, as if it had always been like this, as if Karelia itself was born with the canal.”⁵⁴ This time, the Canal's very existence—and not just the people who create it—is presented in the organic terms of life and death, these paired, yet opposing, experiential moments that have a crucial impact on the culture surrounding the Belomorkanal.

⁴⁹ «Меняется даже география. Вот Беломорский канал. Это уже изменение географии.» RGALI, f. 1604, op. 1, d. 21, l. 21.

⁵⁰ L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds. 181.

⁵¹ «Это издревле задуманный и только социализмом по-новому и куда шире выполненный путь из полярных вод в Балтику.» Ibid. 554.

⁵² Ibid, 593.

⁵³ Figes, *The Whisperers*, 189.

⁵⁴ «Дамбы ушли под воду, все вросло, все как будто так и было, как будто так и родилась Карелия с каналом.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds, 542.

The Karelian landscape played an important role in the Canal's construction, since its particular characteristics created hardships for the project's completion, which were in turn exploited by the authorities as a further testament to the success of socialist labor in the face of difficulties. In particular, the hard, dense Karelian rock proved extremely difficult to break up and remove, especially since the project began in the winter (November 1931), when the ground was frozen solid. Karelia is famous as an area of lakes and rivers, with water covering over a quarter of its territory. Water has a symbolic value for the region, as an exhibit in the State Museum of Karelia makes clear, "Water is the single most valuable element. Water is not only a mineral material, it is not only a means for the development of industry and agriculture, water is an effective conductor of culture, is living blood, which created life where there was none before."⁵⁵ It is important here that water is portrayed not simply as a chemical compound or element of nature; rather it is a culture-bearer, closely linked to the blood of life. The philosopher and former Belomorkanal prisoner A. A. Meier interprets water with similar importance while linking it to human blood, claiming it is the beginning of all life and represents the fertility of the world, without which life is not possible.⁵⁶ Viktor Shklovskii, a participant in the collectively-written *History of the Construction*, remembers his visit to the Belomorkanal in terms of water; he describes how the water levels would rise and fall in the locks, and how the earth would drink the water and, in turn, water would overtake the earth. He draws a profound parallel between this phenomenon he observes at the White Sea-Baltic Canal and the role of the Soviet writer, "I think that in Soviet literature, the soil is the writer. He drinks water for a long

⁵⁵ «Вода – это самое драгоценное ископаемое. Вода – это не просто минеральное сырье, это не только средство для развития промышленного и сельского хозяйства, вода – это действенный проводник культуры, это живая кровь, которая создала жизнь там, где ее не было.» (А. Р. Капринский). From exhibit on water in the State Museum of Karelia.

⁵⁶ A. A. Meier, *Filosofskie sochineniia* (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1982), 143.

time, taking a very long time to absorb it, but then the sudden emergence of the writer rises up, and this unexpected high level of the writer is explained by the fact that he has already consumed a large quantity of time.”⁵⁷ This description sounds not unlike the mechanism by which a canal operates, with water filling a lock’s chamber in order to lift a vessel to the next level of the waterway, and here, metaphorical understanding.

Obviously, the water motif is essential in works about the Belomorkanal, since the harnessing of water is the project’s end goal. Yet water here often represents death rather than life, since the prisoners working at the Canal, “along with the forested banks and flooded cliffs, also drown [their] past life.”⁵⁸ In fact, one of the slogans of the Canal itself is precisely this idea of “drown[ing] [one’s] past in the depths of the canal,” as the camp newspaper *Perekovka* makes clear.⁵⁹ In this reversal of life, water is no longer something natural that allows for human existence; instead, it is something to be conquered, signifying death. It is significant that both interpretations of water contain a direct link to the physicality of human existence—water ultimately either creates or destroys life; it is the blood associated either with birth pains or with death throes. At the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where thousands of people perished on a landscape already marred by death and cruelty,⁶⁰ this violent extremism in the interpretation of water is part and parcel of the overall physicality of cultural narratives surrounding the Canal. An exhibit on

⁵⁷ «Я думаю, что в советской литературе земля – писатель. Он очень долго пил воду, очень долго поглощал ее и вот то неожиданное поднятие писателя, неожиданный высокий уровень писателя объясняется тем, что он поглотил уже много времени.» Viktor Shklovskii, *Sovetskaia literatura na novom etape* (Moscow: Sovetskaia literatura, 1933), 169. Sincere thanks to Sasha Senderovich for his assistance with this and other translations.

⁵⁸ «...которые вместе с лесистыми берегами и скалами затопили и ее прошлую жизнь.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., 536.

⁵⁹ «Потопим свое прошлое на дне канала.» *Perekovka*, 5 June 1934.

⁶⁰ Although this is not the present aim of the current research, approximate mortality rates at the White Sea-Baltic Canal have been attempted by several scholars. Nick Baron estimates around a 10% death rate, with 25,025 deaths among the total 175,000 prisoners. Baron, 643. Others break down the death rates by year, with 1931 and 1932 having approximately 2% death rates, and 1933 having more than a 10% death rate. Kokurin and Morkurov, eds., 34.

the Belomorkanal in the local history museum in Medvezh'egorsk dramatically portrays the idea of death inscribed in banks of the Canal, as a visual representation of the project shows bodies drowning in water (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Exhibit on the White Sea-Baltic Canal at the local history museum in Medvezh'egorsk. Photograph by author.

These harsh physical conditions and subsequent high fatality rate link the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal with the Tsarist-era project of a boat conduit. Both the Tsar's Road and the pathway of the Belomorkanal come to be known colloquially as the *doroga na kostiakh*, or the “road of bones,” underscoring the interconnectedness of these two historical experiences and the brutality imbedded in the landscape. Interestingly, the *doroga na kostiakh* is mentioned in the *History of the Construction*, but only in order to contrast the supposedly humane, Soviet approach to the project with the deadly road-building done by prisoners during the Tsarist era, “The road of bones! says Deli. Karelians say that war captives, working on the building of the road, were dropping by the hundreds. Every meter there is a grave. But we have ten thousand

without a single death, only stomach aches.”⁶¹ Despite the fact that the Tsarist and Soviet-era ambitions to build a waterway share commonalities in terms of motivation and implementation, they are contrasted in the *History of the Construction* in order to distinguish Soviet ideology from its Tsarist precedent.

Given this earlier interest in building a canal, the Soviet Union used the finished Belomorkanal for its own propaganda purposes, claiming that what had been impossible to complete in the Tsarist era was achievable only with the organization and determination of the socialist labor force. Although in a very literal sense this was indeed true, one must also take into account that the Soviet Union exploited the free manual labor of prisoners, thereby drastically cutting costs. They also built the Canal to such a shallow depth—another cost-saving measure—that it is barely navigable.⁶² Nevertheless, the Canal was completed—on budget and on time—and hydro-technical engineers continue to marvel at the Canal’s construction even today, with its unusual system of wooden locks.⁶³ The engineering feat of the Canal’s construction exemplifies the notion of Gulag as laboratory, where new techniques, such as the all-wooden locks developed by the engineer V. N. Maslov, could be attempted.⁶⁴ The prisoners accomplished other technological feats at the Canal precisely because of the lack of equipment, which led to innovation: the development of wooden trucks (ironically called “Fords”), the

⁶¹ «— Дорога на костях! говорит Дели. — Карелы рассказывают, что военнопленных, работающих на постройке дороги, хоронили сотнями. Каждый метр — могила. А у нас на десять тысяч ни один не умер, только животами болели...» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., 291.

⁶² After the completion of the Canal, there was interest in building a second, deeper Canal that would parallel the White Sea-Baltic Canal’s route exactly 1 km to the east, but the project was never pursued, most likely out of embarrassment. Gregory and Lazarev, eds., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 2003), 167.

⁶³ Konstantin Gnetnev, conversation with author, 28 March 2007.

⁶⁴ Gnetnev, 30, 33.

construction of primitive derrick furnaces, and the on-site production of iron.⁶⁵ The successful completion of the Canal project, in turn, popularized the idea of continued Gulag construction projects awarded to the OGPU's control.⁶⁶ It is impossible, therefore, to simply write off the existence of the Canal as a bloody memory in Soviet history that, once memorialized, should be forgotten; the psychological mechanisms and their effectiveness must be assessed in order to understand fully the significance of this Gulag project. As Russia continues to confront (or avoid confronting) its Stalinist past, it is necessary to comprehend—and not merely document—the White Sea-Baltic Canal and its implications. This is why some Russian scholars of the Karelian Gulag claim that the recognition of sin is not enough; there must be full and true repentance.⁶⁷

1.3 PEREKOVKA AS CAMP PHILOSOPHY

Perekovka (re-forging), the transformative process that supposedly reshaped professional criminals into upstanding Soviet citizens through the moralizing power of physical labor, was undoubtedly the ideological backbone of the Belomorkanal project. This concept is vital for understanding the construction of the Canal because many cultural motifs emerge from its implementation: the idea of death and re-birth, the importance of autobiography, the role of art in transforming human beings, the centrality of construction and building metaphors, and the prevalence of violent transmogrification. In addition, *perekovka* has important precedents in

⁶⁵ Mikhail Morukov, "The White Sea-Baltic Canal," *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, Eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 2003), 151-62, 160.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 162.

⁶⁷ Anatolii Tsygankov, *Ikh nazyvali KR: Repressii v Karelii 20-30x godov* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1992), 19.

Soviet culture as well as subsequent adaptations, demonstrating the malleability and applicability of the construct.

The KVO was directly in charge of the re-forging of prisoners. The department was divided into sub-divisions, or *chasti*, each of which was headed by a different *vospitatel'* (educator-reformer). These *vospitateli* were key figures on the Canal, frequently mentioned in prisoner autobiographies and stories. The authorities encouraged *vospitateli* to pen their own biographies, as their experiences were to be important lessons for others. Given the important role of these educators, official sources claim that their backgrounds must be thoroughly verified.⁶⁸ Despite this supposed vigilance on the part of the authorities, criminals sentenced under article 58 could actually be entrusted with the job of *vospitatel'*, ironically educating other prisoners on socialist mores despite their own incarceration for anti-Soviet crimes.⁶⁹ The fact that the OGPU had a difficult time filling posts in the KVO partially explains this highly unorthodox arrangement.⁷⁰ After all, these figures had an ideologically-charged, highly important role; directly in charge of remaking criminals' consciences, they were the true "engineers of the human soul,"⁷¹ echoing Stalin's famous statement on the role of writers in the Soviet Union. The KVO handled all aspects of the re-educational process: it helped to abolish illiteracy among the convicts, organized professional-technical courses for the re-training of the incarcerated, maintained the "red corners" in the barracks and established social and recreational groups for the prisoners.⁷²

⁶⁸ I. L. Averbakh, 42.

⁶⁹ Makurov, ed., *Gulag v Karelii*, document 8, 10.

⁷⁰ Christopher Joyce, "The Gulag in Karelia," *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, eds. (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 2003), 181.

⁷¹ I. L. Averbakh, *Ot prestupleniia k trudu* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1936), 45.

⁷² Ibid, 58, 60, 73, 75.

If the *History of the Construction* is the literary-cultural “bible” of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the monograph *From Crime to Labor* (*Ot prestupleniia k trudu*, 1936) is its sociological-psychological companion in promoting the “religion” of *perekovka*. Although the volume focuses more prominently on the Moscow-Volga Canal, it acknowledges the Belomorkanal as an important antecedent, claiming that the prisoners who went through the “school of the Belomor construction” have an important influence on the workers at the Moscow-Volga Canal and that their experiences are highly consequential on this other great waterway project assigned to the OGPU.⁷³ The leaders of many of the work collectives at the Moscow-Volga Canal came directly from the White Sea-Baltic Canal, with officials acknowledging their previous experience as an important asset.⁷⁴ The volume discusses the penal philosophy of the 1930s, with chapters on remaking prisoners’ attitudes, the organization of cultural-educational work, the importance of collectivity as a work principle, and *udarnichestvo* as a method of work stimulation—all of which are key components of the Belomorkanal program. Most importantly, *perekovka* concerns the transformation of human consciousness; prison is not just about economics or punishment.⁷⁵ Soviet incarceration, therefore, is presented as a means rather than a goal, since the supposed remaking of people is more important than causing them to suffer.⁷⁶ This idea is not entirely new; the Bolsheviks believed that crime was simply a byproduct of an unfair capitalist system⁷⁷ and that the reformation of all prisoners was possible, instituting a maximum five-year sentence for all criminal offenses.⁷⁸ The term “corrective” (*ispravitel'nyi*) labor is substituted for forced

⁷³ «...лагерники, прошедшие школу Беломорстроя.» Ibid, 27.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁷⁷ This concept finds a precedent in French utopian socialist thought, in particular the work of Charles Fourier. Fourier is referenced numerous times in Fedor Dostoevskii’s 1872 novel *The Possessed* and is credited with the foundation of the idealistic community in Utopia, OH.

⁷⁸ Jakobson, 5.

labor in 1921, but the name change becomes mainly an issue of semantics; by 1929, many prisoners are not considered to be re-educable (excluding inmates at the White Sea-Baltic Canal).⁷⁹ Other scholars, however, argue that “years of Gulag propaganda” stressed that “prisoners were temporarily isolated from society but could be reeducated and reintegrated into that society.”⁸⁰

In the flattering portrayal of the Soviet system in *From Crime to Labor*, the penal methods of the USSR are compared with those of capitalist countries. While Fascist Germany presents crime as something inborn and biological and thus impossible to change, the Soviet Union, as the book claims, believes in the possibility of reforming even the most difficult portions of the population.⁸¹ The Soviet penal system is also contrasted to its Tsarist precedent, with images of whips and bodily punishment meant to drive home for the reader the high degree of cruelty in pre-revolutionary Russia.⁸² Similarly, the *History of the Construction* includes pictures of prison cruelty in the Western world, such as Sing-Sing (located in Ossining, New York), and addresses the ineptitude of punishment during the Tsarist era, where the book claims the focus was on suffering rather than rehabilitation.⁸³ Following these ideals, the key to reformation was hard physical labor, and it was most effective when it could be done on large construction projects with a concentrated group of prisoners, such as with the White Sea-Baltic Canal or Moscow-Volga Canal.⁸⁴ The stress on a very strict work ethic has a chilling resonance with the infamous slogan, “Arbeit macht frei” (“work makes you free”) and is echoed in the Soviet labor slogan published on the top of the front page of every camp newspaper: “Labor in

⁷⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁸⁰ Barnes, 840.

⁸¹ I. L. Averbakh, 14.

⁸² Ibid, 8.

⁸³ L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds., 60.

⁸⁴ I. L. Averbakh, 21.

the USSR is a matter of honesty, glory, valor, and heroism.”⁸⁵ Any comparison between Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag, however, must be accompanied by strict qualifications.⁸⁶

Although attempting to underscore the inherent humaneness of the socialist method as opposed to penal techniques employed in “bourgeois” (capitalist) countries, the volume *From Crime to Labor* does not refrain from acknowledging the strict discipline and physical duress in the Gulag:

Labor in the camps is hard work, the discipline is most strict and demanding. The shock-worker labor, the conscious relationship to responsibility, and the genuine striving towards re-forging find absolute encouragement; the breaking of camp discipline, the refusal to work or a lackadaisical approach to work, and even more importantly, the attempts to undermine the realization of corrective-labor politics and the sortie by the class enemy meet a decisive opposition in various forms—from measures of coercion by the camp elite to strict disciplinary measures.⁸⁷

Following up on this sense of warning, the volume notes that this remaking of prisoners’ consciousness cannot be considered a philanthropic or sentimental endeavor; instead, the path to

⁸⁵ «Труд в СССР, дело чести, дело славы, дело доблести и геройства.»

⁸⁶ The debate concerning the feasibility of a comparison between Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag continues to the present day. If one emphasizes the role of the Gulag as a machine of political repression—not its only characteristic, since the camps also have an economic function whereas Nazi concentration camps had virtually no profitable component—the comparison has some weight. See Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev, eds., *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, 191. For a discussion of Soviet labor camps and Nazi concentration camps in the same context, see Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (NY: Oxford UP, 1976). For a recent monograph comparing the Soviet and Nazi experiences, see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael Geyer, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

⁸⁷ «Труд в лагере – труд тяжелый, дисциплина строжайшая и требовательная. Если ударная работа, сознательное отношение к обязанностям, искреннее стремление к перековке находят всяческое поощрение, то нарушение лагерной дисциплины, отказ от работы, недобросовестное к ней отношение, а тем более попытки подорвать осуществление исправительно-трудовой политики и вылазки классового врага встречают решительное противодействие в разнообразных формах – от мер воздействия лагерной общественности до жестких дисциплинарных мер.» I. L. Averbakh, 29.

reformation is a “strict and harsh route” where the “iron discipline” of the camp holds sway.⁸⁸ As the above passage suggests, the class enemy plays a particular role, demonstrating how a type of Soviet ideological school is “in session” at the White Sea-Baltic Canal and other Gulag construction projects. The prisoners were not simply building a Canal and re-building themselves—they were also being indoctrinated in “Soviet speak” while in the secluded, collective laboratory, where propaganda could easily be disseminated and carefully controlled. The Marxist conception of class struggle assumed primary importance at the camp site, and the prison’s cultural-educational division (KVO) had to address such political questions closely.⁸⁹

Several components comprised the cultural-educational work intended to assist in the goal of reformation of inmate consciousness through physical labor. The elements of *sorevnovanie* (competition) and *udarnichestvo* (shock-worker mentality) were essential in the implementation of *perekovka*.⁹⁰ The notion of socialist competition, with all its psychological and sociological undercurrents, became a key motivating force for the prisoners. Since prisoners worked together in brigades and phalanxes, the measure of success was a collective matter. Gulag officials commented upon this phenomenon, encouraging group, rather than individual, measurements of work so as to facilitate a “collective psychology” that was in line with Soviet ideology.⁹¹ This emphasis on group responsibility also had a secondary, pragmatic function: it made it virtually impossible for prisoners to refuse to work. If a loafer is not doing any work and holding up the brigade, he will, in theory, look to the other prisoners working diligently alongside him and feel ashamed about his own non-participation. Eventually, this shame will

⁸⁸ «Путь переделки – суровой и жесткий путь. Подчинение железной дисциплине лагерей...» Ibid, 36.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 35.

⁹¹ Jakobson, 96.

supposedly coerce even the laziest of prisoners into adopting a work ethic.⁹² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discusses the matter in his landmark Gulag novella, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (*Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, 1959):

To outsmart you they thought up the work squad—but not a work squad like in freedom, where Ivan Ivanych receives his separate pay and Petr Petrovich receives his separate pay. In the camps the brigade was arranged such that it was not the administration that hurried along prisoners, but rather the prisoners hurried along each other. It was like this: either you all got a bit extra or you all croaked. You're not working, you bastard—because of you I will be hungry? Put your guts into it, slob.⁹³

Not limited to individual hardship, work brigades also had a negative impact on the collective camp population. The work-for-food system institutionalized cruelty in the Gulag, making survival nearly impossible for the malnourished or feeble—the less food you have, the weaker you become and the less you are able to work, so you continue to receive less food—a deadly circle from which there is no exit.

The prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal formed work brigades (or *brigady*, smaller groups with 25-30 members) and phalanxes (or *falangi*, larger groups consisting of 250-300 prisoners), and these teams competed actively, trying to outdo one another's norm-fulfillment percentages, with the standard norm unearthing 2.5 cubic meters of rock per day.⁹⁴ The formation of work collectives improved everyday conditions, and they were encouraged strongly

⁹² I. L. Averbakh, 52.

⁹³ «На то придумана – бригада. Да не такая бригада, как на воле, где Иван Ивановичу отдельно зарплата и Петру Петровичу отдельно зарплата. В лагере бригада – это такое устройство, чтоб не начальство зэков понукало, а зэки друг друга. Тут как: или всем дополнительное, или все подыхайте. Ты не работаешь, гад, а я из-за тебя голодным сидеть буду? Нет, вкалывай, падло!» A. I. Solzhenitsyn, *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, 46. Translation based on H. T. Willetts 1991: 48, with modifications by the author.

⁹⁴ A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morkurov, eds., 34.

by the authorities; however, prisoners sentenced under article 58 (counter-revolutionary crimes) were in theory not allowed to participate in these groups.⁹⁵ The importance of collective work and its supposed positive effects as demonstrated at the White Sea-Baltic Canal set an example for future projects, influencing the work system developed at the Moscow-Volga Canal.⁹⁶ Workers, therefore, had multiple incentives for overfulfilling their norms: increased food rations, monetary bonuses, and shortened prison terms (the most powerful of all motivations).⁹⁷

Shock-worker labor, or *udarnichestvo*,⁹⁸ also played a key role in the apparatus of re-forging. Similar to the concept of socialist competition, the amount of work produced led directly to material advantages and increased food rations, with the *udarniki* (shock-workers) at the White Sea-Baltic Canal existing almost as a separate social class, enjoying a host of special privileges. The emphasis on the *udarnik* phenomenon anticipates the Stakhanovite movement that was to flourish rapidly in the Soviet Union beginning in 1935, another way in which the Belomorkanal environment forecasted larger trends developed in the Soviet Union as a whole. The rewarding of shock-workers alongside the promotion of work brigades and collectives created tension between the individual and the collective. Although many of the officials recorded percentages of work fulfillment according to brigade, the public boards on display at the Canal listed individual names in order to create either a sense of shame or pride, according to whether one was on the *chernaia doska* (black board of disgrace) or *krasnaia doska* (red board of achievement).

⁹⁵ Makurov, *Gulag v Karelii*, 14.

⁹⁶ I. L. Averbakh, 72.

⁹⁷ A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morkurov, eds., 34.

⁹⁸ Shock-worker labor, or *udarnichestvo*, refers to ultra-productive and enthusiastic physical labor. The phenomenon was ubiquitous at the Belomorkanal and often led to accusations of *tufta* (falsified work reports). The emphasis and privileging of shock-workers anticipates the *Stakhanovite* movement that begins in 1935 with Aleksei Stakhanov's feat in coal mining.

Records of worker percentages were documented publicly on chalkboards for everyone to see, and graphic diagrams around the Canal were a constant reminder of the shame inherent in sub-par labor output. The emphasis on the fulfillment of norms—as would be expected, since the Canal’s construction was part of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan—also allowed for the development of *tufta*, a term that refers to the exaggerated, inaccurate reporting of completed work quotas. The authorities recognized the problem of *tufta* and addressed it directly, threatening harsh punishment—including reduced food rations, imprisonment in RUR (*rota usilennogo rezhima*),⁹⁹ or even sometimes a trial—for anyone who prevaricated regarding his or her labor output.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the issue continued to be a problem and led to one of the more well-known sayings concerning the Canal, “esli b ne tufta i ne ammonal, ne byl by postroen Belomorkanal” (“without padding and ammonal [explosives], there wouldn’t be a Belomorkanal”).¹⁰¹ The elements of *sorevnovanie* and *udarnichestvo* will be explored further in the analysis of prisoner artwork on the Canal, since the psychological mechanisms of these two phenomena are explored at length in convict narratives.

The idea of the New Man (*novyi chelovek*) is one of the key ideological projects under Stalin, and the creation of this Soviet persona shares many qualities with the re-forged prisoner at the camp site: both abjure their past in order to adopt a brighter future, both come to this realization through “correct” ideological training and education, and both are used as a metaphor for the overall greatness and reformability of the Soviet Union itself as a country. The creation of the New Man exemplifies the key tenets of socialist realism’s master plot, where an

⁹⁹ RUR, mentioned in many of the prisoners’ autobiographies and essays, consisted of a separate barracks where those refusing to work would be housed. These prisoners would be visited constantly by members of the Cultural-Educational Department in the attempt to convert them to working life. There are various accounts of the atmosphere at RUR; while some recount how prisoners were indeed transformed by visits from *vosпитатели*, others describe the barracks as a type of criminal den, where convicts loafed about, drank vodka and played cards.

¹⁰⁰ A. I. Kokurin and Iu. N. Morkurov, eds., 34.

¹⁰¹ Zhak Rossi, *Spravochnik po GULagu* (London: Overseas Publications, 1987), 27.

unreformed, uninitiated main character comes to profess a new, ideological way of life given the help of a tutor or trainer, fulfilling the mythical narrative of the mentor-disciple dyad.¹⁰² This is much like the process of *perekovka* at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. A newly arrived, often untrained, prisoner might refuse to work or participate, setting up the task.¹⁰³ The *vospitatel'* acts as the mentor, guiding the prisoner along the path of reformation. While there may be setbacks along the way, eventually a symbolic initiation occurs. This narrative, so similar to the socialist-realist master plot,¹⁰⁴ forms the key structure of most of the prisoner autobiographies from the Belomorkanal, which were mostly written in 1933, a year before the full definition and formal declaration of socialist realism as official literary method at the August 1934 First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers.

The notion of *perkekovka*—in the form of the New Man—has other important parallels in Soviet culture; one of the most interesting, and relevant to this research, is the phenomenon of *besprizorniki*, or homeless orphans, in Russia. Not surprisingly, children were at the forefront of the campaign to indoctrinate individuals with socialist ideology; as in many strictly-controlled regimes, it is common to begin with the youth—their consciousness is not yet fully formed and so represents a *tabula rasa* for ideology.¹⁰⁵ Gor'kii promoted this point of view at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, acknowledging children's literature as “the most important ‘front’ of socialist creative labor and a natural ground for creating the ‘new Soviet man.’”¹⁰⁶ In terms of Soviet literature of the time period, one needs to think only of the slogan-chirping

¹⁰² Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 167-76.

¹⁰³ Clark uses this terminology in her breakdown of the socialist realist master plot, 257.

¹⁰⁴ See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 167-76 and 255-60.

¹⁰⁵ For a more general treatment of the problem of homeless children in newly-industrialized countries, including the attempt to substitute the family with the state, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, Harlow: Pearson, 2005. For an excellent treatment of the Russian situation specifically, see Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007).

¹⁰⁶ Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova, “Introduction, Russian Children's Literature: Changing Paradigms,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 49.2 (Summer 2005), 193.

Nastia in Andrei Platonov's *Kotlovan* (*The Foundation Pit*, 1930)¹⁰⁷ or the strapping soccer player Volodia in Iurii Olesha's *Zavist'* (*Envy*, 1927) to see just how easily younger members of society can become thoughtless ideological containers. The topic of the New Man was essential to children's literature of the late 1920s and early 1930s, since "children's writers were expected to produce books that reflected the new Soviet values."¹⁰⁸ This children's literature often contained industrial themes that linked visual and textual images in an homage to the Russian avant-garde, just as it was also, in a paradoxical move, being streamlined and institutionalized along Party lines.¹⁰⁹ This transitional period in children's literature reflects the nature of artwork produced at the White Sea-Baltic Canal adeptly, since the industrial, collage elements of many of the texts from the Belomorkanal speak to an avant-garde legacy, while the content of many of the narratives are more ideological rather than innovative.

With the evolving role of children's literature also came a new interpretation of childhood. Spearheaded by none other than Gor'kii himself, childhood became an "anti-utopia," a space of suffering and sadness, as is the case with the author's own childhood memoir, which mostly documents his harsh treatment by neighbors and relatives. The idea of a happy childhood was seen as anti-socialist and bourgeois, an outdated notion linked to the gentry class. Instead, Soviet authors chose to portray one's upbringing as lonely and difficult, with separation and alienation from parental figures.¹¹⁰ These unhappy children characters, who use their sorrow and displacement as sources of strength and vitality,¹¹¹ are not so different from the criminals and

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, Andrei Platonov also wrote a short story entitled "The Sluices [Locks] of Epiphany" ("Epifanskie shliuzy," 1927), which focuses on Peter the Great's attempt to build a waterway connecting the Baltic, Black and Caspian Seas. The title page of the short story was on display in the Gor'kii House-Museum during a 2007 visit.

¹⁰⁸ Balina and Rudova, 190.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 191-92.

¹¹⁰ Marina Balina, "Troubled Lives: The Legacy of Childhood in Soviet Literature" *Slavic and East European Journal* 49 (2005), 249.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 251.

thieves at the White Sea-Baltic Canal; they come from broken homes, have certainly had unfortunate childhoods filled with hunger and want, and eventually use this troubled past as a springboard to begin a new future.¹¹² The criminals at the White Sea-Baltic Canal were very often parentless, or if they still had a mother or father alive they were estranged from them because of their unlawful lifestyles. Both groups, the young orphans and the abandoned criminals, were ideal targets for *perekovka* because they had no family structure on which to rely; the Soviet Union, therefore, could easily become their ancestral replacement. Mikhail Nikolaev, orphaned in 1932 at the age of three, recalled:

After all, we were deprived of family events, of conversations around the kitchen table—that non-official, and, in my opinion, most important, source of information that forms man’s notions of life and his relationship with the world. Our ‘window on the world’ was the teachers, the educators, the camp councilors, the radio in the red corner, and the newspaper *The Pioneers’ Truth*.¹¹³

Not only were both groups a type of *tabula rasa* for Soviet ideology, but the two were strategically targeted for reformation, since both wayward orphans and professional criminals represented a threat to the well-being of Soviet society at large.¹¹⁴

¹¹² A parallel could also be drawn between the trajectory of the prisoners’ or children’s transformations and that of saints; in the sacred tradition of hagiography, a future saint undergoes a period of trial and separation where he is outcast from society and/or family members. Eventually, however, the gifted one goes through a type of re-forging in the monastery setting, where a new life and family is adopted. One example of such a *zhitie* would be the life of the Saint Theodosius, written by the monk Nestor.

¹¹³ «Ведь мы были лишены семейных событий, разговоров за домашним столом – той неофициальной и, на мой взгляд, самой важной информации, которая формирует представления человека о жизни и его отношение к миру. Наше «окно в мир» – учителя, воспитатели, пионервожатые, радио-тарелка в красном уголке, *Пионерская правда*...» Mikhail Nikolaev, *Detdom* (NY: Russica, 1985), 89.

¹¹⁴ In addition, the criminal and childhood experiences at times directly overlap; for example, Nikolai Ekk’s famous 1931 film *Putevka v zhizn’* (*Road to Life*) deals specifically with delinquent children trying to forge a new path for themselves.

Anton Makarenko's pedagogical classic, *The Road to Life* (*Pedagogicheskaiia poema*, 1935), tells the story of the appropriately-named Gor'kii colony for young delinquents, where orphans were taken in and “reformed” through education and hard work. Once again, the theme of the New Man comes to the fore, since one of the key goals at the colony centered upon the fact that “we have to find new methods for the creation of the new man.”¹¹⁵ Here the parallels with the Gulag prison camp are even more striking, since the orphanage is likened to a den of thieves, where crime and hooliganism runs rampant.¹¹⁶ The old forms of instruction—such as the rod in Tsarist Russia—are compared to the progressive education of the present day, just as official works about the White Sea-Baltic Canal contrast incarceration there with its capitalist counterpart.¹¹⁷ The importance of strict, military-type training at the Gor'kii colony for juvenile delinquents¹¹⁸ also has an important parallel with the previously-discussed war-like language that various writers and officials use in narrating the Belomorkanal experience.

As with the convicts on the Canal, it is supposedly a new life of construction and physical work that allows the children to change their lives and habits.¹¹⁹ By extension, while rebuilding outhouses or clearing paths in the forest, they can take these physical actions metaphorically, and see them as analogies for their rebuilt lives. This notion of the reconstructed life has important precedents, such as the construction metaphors inherent in Freemasonry, which was very popular in nineteenth-century Russia.¹²⁰ The orphan-thieves of the Gor'kii colony admired the namesake

¹¹⁵ «Значит, нужно нового человек по-новому делать.» A. S. Makarenko, *Pedagogicheskaiia poema* (Moscow: ITRK, 2003), 16. Anton Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, trans. Ivy and Tatiana Litvinov (NY: Oriole, 1973), 4.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, English translation, 20, 43. Russian original, 24, 35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 7. Russian original, 17.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 321. Russian original, 170.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 15, 317, 319. Russian original, 21, 162, 169.

¹²⁰ According to the tenets of Freemasonry, Masonic members are all in the process of “working the rough stone” to various degrees; that is, hewing their lives and passions until they become more refined and contained. Masonry tools, such as the trowel, are used symbolically in order to represent the smoothing of the cracks and crannies in the

of the institution because they could identify with his life and see it as not so different from their own. They idealize his rough-and-tumble biography as well as the romantic portrayal of thieves and criminals in his early short stories and plays. Once again, Gor'kii seems to have become a symbolic persona for the era and its various hopes and struggles. The boys are reported to have reacted positively to Makarenko's explication of Gor'kii's life:

At first they didn't believe me when I told them the real story of Maxim Gorky's own life. They were stunned by the story, suddenly struck by the idea: 'So Gorky was like us! I say, that's fine!' This idea moved them profoundly and joyfully. Maxim Gorky's life seemed to become part of our life. Various episodes in it provided us with examples for comparison, a fund of nicknames, a background for debate, and a scale for the measurement of human values.¹²¹

It is important here that it is specifically Gor'kii's life story that plays such an inspiring role in the boys' lives. In regards to the re-forging of prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, autobiography plays an essential role and often serves as a motivational device, as will become clear in the next chapter.

The Gor'kii colony gave many of the juvenile delinquents a new lease on life, offering them new opportunities and support networks. However, some students leave without ever really changing or were forced to depart because of their continuously mischievous behavior. Although the transformative process occurring at the orphanage is quite similar to the notion of

heart. See Joseph Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1999), 41.

¹²¹ «Сначала не верили мне, когда рассказал действительную историю жизни Максима Горького, были ошеломлены этой историей и внезапно увлеклись вопросом: – Значит, выходит, Горький вроде нас? Вот, понимаешь, здорово! Этот вопрос их волновал глубоко и радостно. Жизнь Максима Горького стала как будто частью нашей жизни. Отдельные ее эпизоды сделались у нас образцами для сравнений, основаниями для прозвищ, транспарантами для споров, масштабами для измерения человеческой ценности.» Makarenko, 79. English translation, 135-36.

perekovka, there are some key differences. The charges living at the colony were not prisoners and could technically leave of their own free will, according to Makarenko's text. More importantly, there was a decided lack of emphatically ideological instruction in their re-education that was absolutely imperative in the re-forging of White Sea-Baltic Canal prisoners. Even though the boys living at the colony expressed interest in becoming Komsomol members, this path was initially forbidden to them, as Party members saw them as delinquents and so not eligible for consideration. Only after their departure from the colony and certifiable reformation could the topic of their inclusion in the youth communist club be discussed.¹²² This is quite the opposite from the situation at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where the prisoners were encouraged from the very beginning to be trained ideologically, to understand Soviet mannerisms, speech, and traditions, because officials believed that the more a previously-debased convict could take pride in his newly upstanding socialist status, the more he or she would likely be transformed completely and permanently.¹²³ The students at the Gor'kii youth colony were eventually allowed to join the Komsomol, and they secured the service of a political instructor to help them achieve this goal.¹²⁴ Since this happens in 1923, a full decade before the Canal's completion, it is not surprising that there are some major philosophical differences between the two experiences. In 1923, Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) was newly in place, and there was not yet the type of ideological severity that characterizes the beginning of Stalin's rule in 1928. The political component of becoming a New Man, which is absolutely essential when it comes to *perekovka*, is not yet fully active in this earlier version of re-forging.

¹²² Makarenko, 381.

¹²³ This attempt to transform not just the working ethic, but also the everyday life and culture of the prisoners, resonates with the overall scheme of Cultural Revolution in Stalin's Russia from 1928-1932.

¹²⁴ Makarenko, 390.

In certain cases, juvenile delinquency and incarceration as reformation followed parallel tracks; the OGPU, in charge of operating the Gulag, also headed children's colonies in order to garner favorable publicity. In 1929, the OGPU sent juvenile delinquents to the Solovki prison camp in an attempt to quell rumors about the abominable conditions in the Gulag; such problem children were also sent to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. In addition, just as Belomorkanal prisoners were ultimately viewed as wares processed by the "factory of life," so did Makarenko interpret unruly children as products in his pedagogical writings, "Every person reformed by us is a product of our pedagogical production. Both we and society must examine our product very intently and carefully, to the last tiny detail."¹²⁵ Although the homeless-children problem had diminished somewhat by the mid-1920s, juvenile criminality soared in 1929 during the brutal process of collectivization.¹²⁶ Since most of the prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal were peasants incarcerated for being kulaks (i.e., wealthy peasants), it is the state itself that created the massive homeless population. In an appropriate twist of fate, both groups—homeless, now basically orphaned children and their convict parents—were subject to the same propaganda of re-education and re-forging in the name of Soviet power. These families, broken apart by the very institutions attempting to indoctrinate them, were now supposed to look to the state itself as a replacement for their family that may at some point have been intact.

The word *perekovka*, in its very morphological structure, emphasizes the notion of remaking or redoing. At Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, everything would be made new: geography, industry, nature, economy, country, culture, and, of course, people. The people

¹²⁵ «Каждый воспитанный нами человек – это продукт нашего педагогического производства. И мы, и общество должны рассматривать наш продукт очень пристально и подробно, до последнего винтика.» Anton Makarenko, "Opyt metodiki raboty detskoï trudovoi kolonii," *Sochineniia*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Akademiia pedagogicheskikh nauk, 1951), 339-463, 441. Translation mine.

¹²⁶ Jakobson, 123.

would be forged alongside the construction of the Canal, and both would be equally important.¹²⁷

At the Canal, the administration could make people into honest Soviet citizens just as easily as they could make them into cement mixers, claims the *History of the Construction*.¹²⁸ The frequent use of the prefix “pere-” reflects this near obsession with reconstruction. Since this prefix often refers to the repetition of some action with a better completion as the outcome, the idea of *perekovka* is echoed literally thousands of times while being applied to all different words and situations in the *History of the Construction*: *perestroit'* (to rebuild), *pererozhdenie* (re-birth), *perezhit'* (to survive), *perereshat'* (to change one's mind), “rabota ikh pereuchit” (work will re-teach, train them), *perevypolnenie* (overfulfillment), *peredumat'* (to change one's mind), *perechuvstvovat'* (to experience), *pereshchegoliat'* (to outflaunt); the list could go on and on.¹²⁹

The emphasis on remaking—with the prefix *pere-* as its vehicle—is so strong that there is an overall sense of forward motion in the book as a whole. Everything is in the process of being re-done and re-made, and it is not simply to make the same object or perform the same action over again; rather, it is to do it bigger and better. Not surprisingly, some of the most ideologically-charged chapters of the *History of the Construction* contain the most *pere-* prefixed words: “Chekists,” “Canal Army Soldiers,” and “Crush the Class Enemy” are a few examples. In this new society, the old life—social customs, historical facts, class divisions, criminal life, language, politics—must be destroyed violently in order to accommodate the new. Birth and death are the defining moments of any experience; they are the bookends of life, rich in ritualistic meaning. In addition, the presence of death and re-birth within the context of *perekovka* ritualizes the phenomenon, since the majority of rituals cluster around these two foundational life events. In

¹²⁷ L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds. 180.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 177.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 185, 187, 197, 231, 132, 263, 197, 390, 390.

turn, *perekovka* in some ways resembled an initiation rite; in initiation ceremonies, as the anthropologist Mircea Eliade notes, the old must be destroyed in order to be created anew, with the initiation process allowing one to grasp a positive aspect within death itself.¹³⁰

Perekovka was not a peaceful process. It was a violent, aggressive experiment in human transformation where one's past life was annihilated to make room for a new one; the re-forging story of the prisoner Rottenberg is defined in medical terms, "Now we will try a new surgery with the knife, that is, to cut the tissue of the surface."¹³¹ In Gor'kii's introduction to the *History of the Construction*, he claims that he fights "not to kill as the bourgeoisie does, but rather to resurrect laboring humankind into a new life, and I will kill only when there is no longer the possibility to blot out man's former habits of feeding on the flesh and blood of people."¹³² Not only is violence an inherent component of the re-forging process, but prisoners may be met with violence if they do not subject themselves to the demands of *perekovka*. A human being, in turn, is physical matter that can be melded and shaped or otherwise tossed away, "It is immeasurably more difficult to refine human raw material than wood, stone, or metal."¹³³ It is acknowledged, however, that the process is not an easy one, nor is it simple to describe: "There is not a supply of words sufficient for the various and complicated processes of re-forging and its feeling, senses, and habits."¹³⁴ The re-forging process is violent, physical, difficult, supposedly permanent and very strong language is used to describe the procedure in the *History of the Construction*.

¹³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Woodstock, CT: Spring, 1958), xiii.

¹³¹ «Теперь попробуем ножом хирурга, так сказать, разрезать ткань поверхности.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds., 523.

¹³² «Я борюсь не для того, чтоб убить, как это делает буржуазия, а для того, чтоб воскресить трудовое человечество к новой жизни, я убиваю только тогда, когда уже нет возможности вытравить из человека его древнюю привычку питаться плотью и кровью людей.» Ibid, 12.

¹³³ «Человеческое сырье обрабатывается неизмеримо труднее, чем дерево, камень, металл.» Ibid, 609.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 14.

Perekovka, with its goal of the “production” of new people, injects an industrial emphasis into the process of re-forging prisoners—an entirely appropriate tone, given the concentration on manufacturing during Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan. One prisoner likens the Canal to a “life factory” (*fabrika zhizni*), where people are remade like so many products on a conveyor belt—albeit in a highly unusual way: “Yes, strange, unusual transformations are made here. Miraculous transformations, nothing about which you could even find in fairy tales.”¹³⁵ Despite the technical association inherent in *perekovka* as an industrial, metallic procedure, texts often portray the process as organic in order to strengthen its claim to veracity; its supposedly spontaneous occurrence makes it seem like a natural phenomenon.¹³⁶ The attempt to make initiation rites seem organic is quite common in general, even though the new birth is anything but natural, instead representing a societal, cultural construction.¹³⁷ In the irrevocably changed environment where nature is plundered for its bounty and people are transformed for their psyches, the Soviet Union proclaims itself the victor in the “war against nature,” and in the process a new version of nature is created, which has its own laws, rules, and processes.

The process is so complete and totalizing that the “new” person might not recognize the “old,” symbolizing the utter finality of the transformation, “The engineer Magnitov thought about the old engineer Magnitov—for him this man was already a stranger.”¹³⁸ The raw, physical acts of death and birth, in turn, were both inherent components of re-forging, underscoring the violent nature of artistic and ideological works concerning the White Sea-Baltic Canal. *Perekovka* also reveals the essential role that autobiography plays in the cultural

¹³⁵ «Да, странные, необычайные превращения творятся здесь. Чудесные превращения, о которых даже в сказках ничего не найдешь.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 33, d. 3, l. 285.

¹³⁶ “Hans Günther, “Der Bau des Weißmeerkanaals als Laboratorium des neuen Menschen,” *Bücher haben ihre Geschichte*, eds. Petra Josting and Jan Wirrer (Hildesheim: Olms, 1996), 63.

¹³⁷ Eliade, xiv.

¹³⁸ L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor’kii, eds., 542.

narratives about the Canal; in order to articulate one's new life and devotion, it was necessary to recall where you came from and who you used to be. Just as the map could assess change in landscape and geography, the material text of the autobiography could document the change in a human being. The phenomenon echoed the construction of the Canal itself; like "working the rough stone,"¹³⁹ building the person is a process that happens over time, "in the creation of great new projects the new great man is created."¹⁴⁰ Finally, *perekovka* demonstrates the important role of creativity at the White Sea-Baltic Canal—not only do artistic and cultural works document examples of re-forging, but even the act itself was achieved with the assistance of cultural texts in addition to physical labor, since these two elements were the most important instruments of transformation in the Soviet toolbox.

1.4 MONTAGE, COLLAGE AND ASSEMBLAGE AS STYLISTIC AND IDEOLOGICAL DEVICES

It is important here to address in more detail the importance of montage and collage as specific artistic terms and also as philosophical/theoretical constructs. Collage and montage are often collapsed as categories, but they are different terms with specific applications. Collage—from the French word *coller*, to glue—combines different media in order to draw attention to the relationship between art and everyday life, with a characteristic pieced-together quality.

¹³⁹ This turn of phrase emerges from the Freemason movement that spread rapidly in eighteenth-century Russia and asserts that people could smooth the roughness of their passions just as a stone setter hews rock. For more on this subject, see Thomas Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois UP, 1999).

¹⁴⁰ «В творчестве новых великих дел создается новый великий человек.» L. Averbakh, S. Firin, and M. Gor'kii, eds., 342. Note also that the Russian word *tvorchestvo* used here also refers to creativity as well as creation, beautifully capturing the artistic-industrial hybridity inherent in the canal's construction.

Montage, on the other hand, refers not to the external intrusion of foreign elements but rather to an intra-medium phenomenon whereby contrasting elements are integrated within one form, and it is most often used in reference to film.¹⁴¹ Although montage plays an important role in non-prisoner narratives regarding the Belomorkanal, especially in the documentary films of Aleksandr Lemberg to be discussed in Chapter Three, collage remains more relevant to prisoner-written texts; the word itself indicates the cobbling together of disparate elements with rough edges still showing—an apt metaphor for prisoner narratives.¹⁴²

The cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are largely credited with developing the style of collage and making it into a legitimate art form in pre-war Europe. Following the cubists, the futurists continued to expand the technique for their art experiments. Since the often jarring juxtapositions inherent in collage collapse the low-culture *quotidien* and high-culture art world, the style is apt for the futurists who have as their goals the abolition of museums and the delivering of art to the people in the street; as the futurist manifesto “Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (*Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu*, 1912) proclaims, “The past is restricting. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc., overboard from the Ship of Modernity.”¹⁴³ This formulation echoes the philosophy of the avant-garde itself, which asserts that both art and literature must become components of everyday life.¹⁴⁴ Collage represents the “falling together” of modernism, with its

¹⁴¹ Weisstein, 137.

¹⁴² Collage can also serve as an apt metaphor for the construction of biography; for more on this topic, see Cristina Vatulescu’s interpretation of secret police files as examples of collage and montage, “Arresting Biographies: The Secret Police File in the Soviet Union and Romania,” *Comparative Literature* 3 (2004): 243-61.

¹⁴³ D. Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, Victor Khlebnikov, “Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, eds. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 51. «Прошлое тесно. Академия и Пушкин – непонятнее иероглифов. Бросить Пушкина, Достоевского, Толстого и проч., и проч., с парохода современности.»

¹⁴⁴ McCauley, 456.

qualities of disintegration and fragmentation leading to a subsequent integration.¹⁴⁵ As a style, collage refutes norms and tradition, strengthening its connection to the avant-garde worldview.¹⁴⁶ The presence of collage as an artistic style in so many of the artworks on the Canal attests to the avant-garde inheritance that forms a substantial component of the creative drive at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Collage promotes the Canal in a tourist pamphlet called “Foto-turist” (“Photo-Tourist”). While the cut and pasted-in paper titles may represent a simple technical necessity, the end result is still the same, with the photographs having a fractured, piecemeal appearance.

Collage embodies the precarious tension between important pairs of opposites: high and low culture, the individual and the collective, truth and falsity.¹⁴⁷ Such oppositions were symbolically ubiquitous at the Canal site, and collage as an art form may have served as an appropriate way to channel this tension between opposites: freedom and incarceration, life and death, individual and collective, prisoner and non-prisoner. The inherent reproducibility of newspapers, as well as their capacity to transform language into a commodity, makes them a suitable and frequent insertion in collage pieces.¹⁴⁸ Many collage artists incorporated them into their works; Picasso and Braque often included newspaper fragments in their works. Similarly, prisoners and officials at the Canal often cut out poems and slogans from the camp newspaper *Perekovka* and glued them onto other texts.¹⁴⁹

Collage emphasizes the active process behind art rather than the finished product, and the focus shifts from the result to the ongoing artistic process. The labor involved in creating a

¹⁴⁵ Katherine Hoffman, ed., *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989), 3.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 5, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 171, 177, 184.

¹⁴⁹ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 72, l. 1, 26. In both of these instances, poems from the newspaper *Perekovka* are cut out and literally glued into the margins of the original manuscript of the *Istoriia stroitel'stva*.

collage, therefore, is part and parcel of the art object itself. The primacy of labor in this context makes it an even more appropriate style for Belomorkanal narratives, “Time is not necessary for the collage artist to achieve mastery, itself an ideological token. Rather, he or she plugs directly into the instantaneous present of cultural artifacts. Craft becomes equivalent to labor, which is time itself in a material sense.”¹⁵⁰ Collage, therefore, reconfigures the relationship between space and time. With its unique potential to address and assess society, collage has the possibility of not just commenting upon the contemporary world but can also “interact with it so as to change it.”¹⁵¹ This capability points to collage’s potential revolutionary quality—a world-changing capacity, not surprising given collage’s challenge to the art world’s privileging of painting as preferred medium.¹⁵² In this important transitional moment in art history, creativity is no longer mimetic, and works no longer need to produce a mere copy of the outside world. Instead, art faces and challenges the multiplicity of contemporary realities, with an infusion of the everyday creating, but not dictating, an art piece.¹⁵³ In this newly constructed reality, art may have the guise of *realia*—defined here as “things in themselves and their immediate reality”¹⁵⁴—but it instead challenges and puts into question the very possibility of the “knowable” world and its various documentary materials, rather than merely recreating it.¹⁵⁵

Although the prisoners and non-prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal would probably not have considered their personal artworks as collages, their texts embody many of these same principles. The notion of *realia* comes into play in a controversial way; the documents have an

¹⁵⁰ Hoffman, 220.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 221.

¹⁵² Ibid, 63.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 60-61.

¹⁵⁴ Nora, 23.

¹⁵⁵ Perhaps such artworks—which have the guise of reality but are clearly artistic fictions—can actually more accurately represent a particular reality as a type of *lieu de mémoire*. The current obsession with the documentary fragment and archival trace, as Pierre Nora would argue, demonstrates that all representations of memory are mere fabrications. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

illusion of veracity while nevertheless remaining creative, imaginary works, complicating their status as historical documents. The *History of the Construction* is a prime example of this phenomenon, evident in its very title. While the “History of the Construction” of the White Sea-Baltic Canal leads the reader to believe this will be a documentary, encyclopedic source, the text is far from representing an objective, historical reality. Even other contemporaneous, more sociologically-based sources emphasize that the book is a mere “fictional sketch” (*iavliaetsia khudozhestvennym ocherkom*) and should not be taken seriously as a theoretical model.¹⁵⁶ The text itself is a collage of various materials: *chastushki* (ditties), *prikazy* (orders), menus, life stories, photographs, agitational slogans, newspaper articles, and poetry. The collage style of the work appears not only in its content, but also in its form, since the *History of the Construction* is an “experiment” of collective writing where various segments of contributors’ words are literally pieced together.¹⁵⁷

The integration of radically different elements serves as a metaphor for the Canal population, with its profound diversity representing a type of human assemblage—the medium that is collage’s three-dimensional twin—including a pastiche of criminal and political prisoners, rapists and priests. The end product of the prisoners’ labor, the Canal itself, is a type of assemblage, since the project was built according to the *metro-metod* (subway method) whereby various *punkty* (points) were brought together as workers built coming towards one another, rather than simply in a straight line.¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, “great armies of labor” who erect a wall in

¹⁵⁶ I. L. Averbakh, 31.

¹⁵⁷ This phenomenon becomes especially clear when working with the original copies of the book in GARF. There you can see paragraphs cut and pasted together (montage) as well as poetry cut out from the *Perekovka* newspaper and pasted into the margins (collage).

¹⁵⁸ My thanks to Mikhail Dankov of the Karelian History Museum in Petrozavodsk, Russia, for this insight.

Franz Kafka's short story "The Great Wall of China" employ this same work method, which ultimately proves problematic both literally and metaphorically in the text.¹⁵⁹

The varied languages, customs, backgrounds and religions on the Canal became a single working organism, however oddly shaped, toiling in the name of building socialism and completing the first Five-Year Plan. This very direct and intense encounter with various nationalities and ethnicities often had a marked impression on the prisoners. The priest, historian, and convict P. A. Florenskii writes in a letter to his wife about how the large barracks in which he is living is filled with *natsmeny* (national minorities),¹⁶⁰ and he sits back listening to their various languages with awe and wonder.¹⁶¹ The diversity of the prisoner population could also be a source of tension and conflict. Apparently, the mullahs (*mully*) in particular proved to be a challenge to authorities, since they frequently disrupted the camp's discipline.¹⁶² These episodes demonstrate not only the difficulties created by a diverse prisoner population but also the officials' lack of control in unruly situations.¹⁶³ It also shows another battle faced by prison authorities—the fight to liquidate religious devotion. Yet this diversity could have quite positive effects on the other prisoners incarcerated at the Belomorkanal, since this unusual exposure introduced them to situations that would otherwise not be possible in their everyday lives. One such beneficiary would be the linguist Teodor Shumovskii, who was able to further his research

¹⁵⁹ In Kafka's story, this method allows for many gaps in the wall, and the announcement of the completion of the project comes before it has actually been finished. What was meant to be the primary purpose of the wall—protection—is undermined by the fact that the wall is full of uncompleted sections. Art, indeed, imitates life, since the Canal was also not built properly for its intended purpose. Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China," *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections* (NY: Schocken Books, 1970), 83-97.

¹⁶⁰ The designation *natsmeny*, which is an abbreviation for *natsional'nye men'shinstva*, or national minorities, merited its own specific attention during the construction of the canal and GARF holds archival documents relating specifically to the challenges this group faced at the work site.

¹⁶¹ Makurov, ed., *Gulag v Karelii*, 22.

¹⁶² I. L. Averbakh, 77.

¹⁶³ Official documents pertaining to the White Sea-Baltic Canal note a rise in criminal activity and banditry, a phenomenon that is partially blamed on the darkness of Karelian nights. In addition, the prisoners' refusal to work and obstinate behavior are blamed on the lack of prison guards. Makurov, ed., *Gulag v Karelii*, documents 3, 6, and documents 11, 14, respectively.

on the connections between the Arabic and Russian languages thanks to the time he spent as a tree-feller among the highly diverse, often eastern, population at the White Sea-Baltic Canal.¹⁶⁴

At the Belomorkanal, *punkty* (points) and *uchastki* (sections) divided areas of the work site just as *trudkollektivy* (work collectives) and *brigady* (brigades) delineated various groups of prisoners. Despite the fact that prisoners constantly identified their *lagpunkt*, *otdelenie*, and *brigada* or *trudkollektiv* in their texts as the Canal's version of a home address, they often considered themselves not so much as individuals, but rather members of the larger working "family" of the *Belomorkanal* or the Soviet Union itself, reiterating official ideology.¹⁶⁵ The prisoner G. Mel'nikov, in an essay entitled "Ot belogo do baltiiskogo" ("From the White Sea to the Baltic"), likens the Canal population to one large ant colony working together, using the diction of war to explain their unity: "Along the route of the great path [the Canal] there aren't Uzbeks, Tatars, Armenians, Ukrainians, Russians, Georgians, Belorussians, Poles, and Germans, here there are only soldiers in the Canal army and their commanders."¹⁶⁶ While this passage emphasizes the holistic nature of the workforce, it also unwittingly points out the diversity of the group by individually listing their ethnicities. On an even larger scale of assemblage, the White Sea-Baltic Canal—with the subsequent completion of its "sister project," the Moscow-Volga Canal—demonstrates the "uniting of five seas," an important slogan inspiring the completion of both waterways, as the *nachal'nik* of the eighth division of the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction, S. L. Moiseev, remembers it.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Teodor Shumovskii, conversation with author, 18 February 2007.

¹⁶⁵ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 36, l. 2.

¹⁶⁶ «На трассе великого пути нет узбеков, татар, армян, украинцев, русских, грузин, белоруссов, поляков, и немцев, здесь только бойцы армии канала, и их командиры.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3., d. 33, l. 143.

¹⁶⁷ NARK, f. 365, op. 1, d. 12, 5. The tenacity of the slogan also became apparent in my interview with Teodor Shumovskii, who emphatically repeated the phrase several times during our conversation together.

The term montage in Russian (*montazh*) beautifully captures the art-labor divide so important in the Canal's ideology, since the word refers both to the assembly of machinery and the artistic technique.¹⁶⁸ The concept can be found in other construction projects touting the moralizing force of *perekovka*; the prisoner Vasilii Azhaev at the Baikal-Amur camp titles a report about his life and transformation "The Montage of Life" (*Montazh zhizni*).¹⁶⁹ Aleksandr Rodchenko uses constructivist montage in much of his photography of the Canal, in particular in the 1932 issue of *USSR under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*) dedicated to the Canal. One of the prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal who most clearly embodies the stylistic device of both collage and montage is Igor' Terent'ev, a key figure in the Russian futurist movement and important *agitbrigady* organizer at the Belomorkanal. Agitational propaganda in the Soviet Union itself often used montage, with agit-prop trains representing a giant, moving montage.¹⁷⁰ Terent'ev espoused the revolutionary theatrical practice of "litomontazh" in his organization of *agitbrigady*.¹⁷¹ The innovation was popular enough to become its own category for competition in the newspaper *Perekovka*, where the "litomontazh"¹⁷² entitled "How to Build a Waterway" (*Kak stroit' vodnyi put'*), a text that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, won a prize of 75 rubles.¹⁷³

Whether along literal or metaphorical, artistic, or historical lines, the terms montage, collage, and assemblage can help the researcher to understand the complex ideological landscape of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal in a new and productive way. This theme will continue to be

¹⁶⁸ See also Cynthia Ruder's linking of montage with *The History of the Construction*: Cynthia Ruder, "Modernist in Form, Socialist in Content: *The History of the Construction of the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal*," *Russian Literature* 44 (1998): 469-84.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, 46.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁷¹ Igor' Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 299.

¹⁷² The term "litomontazh" basically refers to the application of montage techniques to theatrical performance, and the phenomenon is explored more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

¹⁷³ *Perekovka*, 21 August 1932.

addressed closely, and in a more text-specific way, in the chapters that deal with prisoner and non-prisoner narratives.

1.5 AVANT-REALISM AS LITERARY STYLE

The first Five-Year Plan as a specific era in Soviet history not only allowed for the commencement of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, but also figured directly into its subsequent myth-making. The atmosphere of acceleration made the Belomorkanal's construction a newly relevant project; here, as the propaganda would affirm, it became apparent how industrial projects could be achieved in the Soviet Union that earlier were impossible. The central motifs of the White Sea-Baltic Canal project—re-forging, the New Man, the building of socialism, and the war against nature—are also evident in the general cultural atmosphere of the time. The period of literary history under discussion here reaches beyond the dates of the Canal's construction to span the years from 1924 (Lenin's death) to 1933 (the last year before the declaration of socialist realism as official doctrine and the time of Canal's completion), exemplifying a style I will term "avant-realism" to underscore the blending of avant-garde and socialist realist motifs. This decade marked a transitional period in Soviet literature; the apogee of the avant-garde had passed and the permissive atmosphere of NEP (Lenin's New Economic Policy) was fading, yet the ideological rigidity of Stalin was not yet fully entrenched. Literary and artistic works from this era have an interesting hybridity, seemingly avant-garde in form—employing techniques like collage and montage—and socialist-realist in content—emphasizing the transformative potential of socialist labor and the ideological goals of the Soviet Union.

In order to understand the idea of avant-realism, it is necessary briefly to survey the avant-garde and several of its splinter groups, including *Lef*, the constructivists, and the productionists, several of whose members have a direct relationship to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Boris Groys, in his landmark work *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), reconfigures the position of the avant-garde in Russian culture. Rather than corroborating the idea that the avant-garde represents “good” art that is experimental and “pure” because it is not entirely in service to the state, he claims that the avant-garde actually made socialist realism possible, with the latter serving the former: “Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms.”¹⁷⁴ Instead of the traditionally-conceived great break between the avant-garde and socialist realism, Groys makes the convincing argument that the logic and experience of the avant-garde organically grew into socialist realism, a claim buttressed by this analysis of the cultural texts surrounding the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where the artistic works seem to accommodate both avant-garde forms and socialist realist motifs.

The avant-garde, as Groys would claim, requires that art “move from representing to transforming the world.”¹⁷⁵ The devices of montage, collage, and assemblage, therefore, tend to have avant-garde characteristics and embody the revolutionizing potential of art. Art, as the avant-garde ethos asserts, is no longer to be mimetic, but, like collage, should interrogate and call into question the very existence of reality. The Russian revolution provided avant-garde artists with an unprecedented historical opportunity—the chance to translate their experiments into reality. Aleksandr Rodchenko, who played a key role in documenting the White Sea-Baltic Canal with his artistic photography, developed the program of constructivism in 1919 in which

¹⁷⁴ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 9.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

art was detached from everyday reality and likened to a subconscious machine.¹⁷⁶ This line of experimentation parallels the desire to recreate the world at the Belomorkanal, and it becomes understandable why Rodchenko was so sympathetic to the project,¹⁷⁷ “The constructivists themselves regarded their constructions not as self-sufficient works of art, but as models of a new world, a laboratory for developing a unitary plan for conquering the material that was the world.”¹⁷⁸ This formulation contains numerous tropes relevant to this research: the construction of a new world and ethos, the experimental laboratory, and the war against nature.

Constructivism, with its emphasis on the materiality of art, lent itself naturally to the development of productionism, or “the production of utilitarian objects and the organization of production and everyday life by artistic methods.”¹⁷⁹ Constructivists such as Boris Arvatov maintained that societal life should be organized down to the smallest detail according to artistic forms¹⁸⁰ and that art itself should be utilitarian and maximally functional. Some of the *Lef* theorists—a large and important group of Soviet artists, including Vladimir Maiakovskii, Osip Brik, and Aleksandr Rodchenko—clearly resonate with the officially-proposed ethos of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. The theoretician Nikolai Chuzak titled his article in *Lef* “Under the Sign of Life-Building” (*Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia*) in order to demonstrate how art could build, rather than simply know, life.¹⁸¹ Chuzak’s formulation becomes a motto for the *Lef* group, due in part to the essay’s prominent placement in the first issue of the group’s journal.¹⁸² In his essay, Chuzak defines art as a method of life-building as well as a type of engineering, aligning

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 21-22.

¹⁷⁷ According to some sources, Rodchenko was so enthralled by the Canal that he was bored after leaving it on his two-month assignment, and he returned to the work site to take more than 2000 pictures. See L. Volkov-Lannit *Aleksandr Rodchenko risuet, fotografiruet, sport* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 127.

¹⁷⁸ Groys, 22.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 25.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 27.

¹⁸² Hans Günther, “Zhiznestroenie,” *Russian Literature* 20 (1986): 41.

the creative with the mechanical and practical.¹⁸³ The most important aspect of *zhiznestroeniie* (“life-building”) is the emphasis on art’s transformative properties, a model that is at least partially indebted to the symbolists Andrei Belyi and Viacheslav Ivanov, to whom Chuzak owes part of his inspiration.¹⁸⁴ This trajectory makes the avant-garde even less detached from the time periods surrounding it, since the term is related both to the pre-revolutionary symbolists and elements of Stalinist culture. *Zhiznestroeniie* proves to be an enduring concept, influencing twentieth-century Russian art in general,¹⁸⁵ and the term “life-building” itself echoes elements of *perekovka*.¹⁸⁶ Since the *Lef* artists promoted the “literature of fact,” privileging documentary sources over purely aesthetic or artistic ones, the pragmatic appeal of life-building seems evident.

The members of *Lef* were not just artists; instead, they fashioned themselves as engineers who had as their goal the transformation of the whole world. This complete intersection of societal goals with the mechanics of art makes an interesting parallel with the ideological atmosphere at Belbaltlag, where physical labor and artistic production were inseparable categories, where engineers and hydro-technicians became artists, and where dikes and dams became artworks, both literally and metaphorically. This new formulation of art allowed ideological concerns to overtake the artwork itself, political nuances being unavoidable. Art now had a higher objective—rather than reflecting reality or serving as entertainment, it could recast the world and transform it in the absence of God. As the avant-garde waned and socialist realism became the new literary doctrine, there is a shift from restructuring the world to restructuring

¹⁸³ N. F. Chuzak, “Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia,” *Lef* 1 (1923): 12-13.

¹⁸⁴ Günther, “Zhiznestroenie,” 42.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹⁸⁶ “Symbolists dreamed of ‘transfiguration’ of man, the Futurists took up the task of ‘reforging’ (*perekovka*) of man.” Irina Gutkin, “From Futurism to Socialist Realism,” *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, Eds. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), 167-198, 195.

human beings,¹⁸⁷ a move that underscores the notion of *perekovka* and allows for Stalin to become the key transmogrifier of the world.

Productionism, as the term itself makes clear, is related to the category of production literature that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. The chief genre of this artistic style was the novel, and it is at least partially for this reason that production, or industrial, novels are so commonly included in the category of socialist realism. As Karen McCauley adeptly argues, however, the production novel actually has stronger ties to the avant-garde inheritance rather than to socialist realism.¹⁸⁸ The need to redraw the trajectory of Russian literary history is once again made clear; the avant-garde cannot be entirely separated from socialist realism, just as the artistic works in the approximate period of 1928-1933, or what I choose to call avant-realism, cannot be equated with the socialist realist doctrine. Production novels, usually included in the category of socialist realism, often have avant-garde motifs and tendencies, as in the case of Ilya Erenburg's *Den' vtoroi* (*The Second Day*, 1933)¹⁸⁹ and Marietta Shaginian's *Gidrotsentral'* (*Hydrocentral*, 1930).¹⁹⁰ In the production novel, the site of the factory often not only composes the space of the action, but also serves as a socio-cultural center.¹⁹¹ The foregrounding of an industrial space for a work of art echoes the constructivist, productionist, and more general avant-garde designs for a mechanically-inspired world.¹⁹² The factory as space is important to the production novel and to the White Sea-Baltic Canal in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense. While it is obvious that an industrially-themed work would have a factory as its backdrop, it is more important and interesting that it is not merely cement, spools, or skirts being made at

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 37.

¹⁸⁸ Karen A. McCauley, "Production Literature and the Industrial Imagination," *Slavic and East European Journal* 3 (1998): 444-66.

¹⁸⁹ The English title of Erenburg's novel is often not translated literally, using instead the title *Out of Chaos*.

¹⁹⁰ McCauley, 454-58.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 447.

¹⁹² Ibid, 448.

the factory in question. Instead, people become the products of the factories in which they work, and new Soviet citizens are produced alongside, and with no difference from, manufactured goods. Such a move likens the industrial factory line to both the organic life cycle and the creative process.

Viktor Shklovskii, one of the contributors to the *History of the Construction*, recognizes the shortcomings of the life-as-factory in his book *Third Factory* (*Tret'ia fabrika*, 1926), where human beings and their consciousness become unsuccessful commodities, “As a factory, the factory is right. As life, the factory is a flop.”¹⁹³ In Shklovskii’s commentary on the role of the artist and his product, he defines the first factory as his school and family, the second as OPOIaZ (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language), and the third as his life, which continues to “process” him. Shklovskii’s book is full of production-related vocabulary (commodity, semi-processed, labor), but more importantly it speaks about the new, and often confusing, role for the artist in the Soviet Union:

At the moment, there are two alternatives. To retreat, dig in, earn a living outside literature and write at home for oneself. The other alternative is to have a go at describing life, to conscientiously seek out the new society and the correct world view. There is no third alternative. Yet that is precisely the one that must be chosen. An artist should avoid beaten paths.¹⁹⁴

In his book, full of contradictions, Shklovskii at once rejects and wants to embrace the newly-created cultural arena, “Don’t tell us who we are. We are the stones on which the truth is

¹⁹³Viktor Shklovskii, *Third Factory*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 77. «Как фабрика – фабрика права. Как жизнь – она неудачна.» V. Shklovskii, *Tret'ia fabrika* (Moscow: Krug, 1926), 137.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 47. «Есть два пути сейчас. Уйти, окопаться, зарабатывать деньги не литературой и дома писать для себя. Есть путь – пойти описывать жизнь и добросовестно искать нового быта и правильного мировоззрения. Третьего пути нет. Вот по нему и надо идти. Художник не должен идти по трамвайным линиям.» Shklovskii, 84.

sharpened [...] I am not denying my own time. I want to understand it—how it needs me and what it means to my work [...] If a bad school is good schooling, then the first factory was right. To the second, we gave our labor and our life. Were we sown for fiber or for seed?”¹⁹⁵ Not only is art a commodity, but so is the human being; a raw material harvested for some type of economic gain, whether it is a finished product or the potential to recreate it. His treatment of the factory motif is also morbidly humorous, “Take me, third factory of life! But don’t put me in the wrong guild.”¹⁹⁶ Shklovskii’s brazen commentary on the relationship between production and literature demonstrates his shrewd foresight in addressing the political environment of his day, highlighting the specific struggles of the artist in the ideological landscape of the Soviet Union. Shklovskii addresses topics in his work that continue to resonate years later with the texts created at the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

The narratives from the White Sea-Baltic Canal are connected culturally to socialist realism as well as to the avant-garde, and the unique space of the prison camp, allows for a particular blend of the two styles. Many of the features inherent in socialist realist novels are apparent in the re-forging narratives of White Sea-Baltic Canal prisoners: the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic, the struggle with nature, and the substitution of the state for the biological family. In addition, the plot structure of socialist-realist novels, as outlined by Katerina Clark, matches almost identically the narratives of *perekovka*. The “separation” occurs when the prisoner arrives at the camp site, the “setting up the task” is the acknowledgement of the work that needs to be completed, the “transition” and “trials” occur when the *vospitatel’* visits

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 38. «Не объясняйте нам, кто мы такие. Мы камни, о которые точат истину [...] Я не отрицаю своего времени. Я хочу понять его, – чем я ему нужен и что оно для моей работы [...] Если плохая школа – хорошая школа, то первая фабрика права. Второй – мы дали свой труд и жизнь. На волокно или на семя мы были посеяны?» Shklovskii, 71.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 78. «Прими меня, третья фабрика жизни! Не ступай только моего цеха.» Shklovskii, 139.

the prisoner and convinces him or her of the moralizing power of physical labor, the “incorporation” and “initiation” occurs when the prisoner is considered completely re-forged and vows never to return to his or her earlier, criminal lifestyle, and the “finale” happens when the prisoner is awarded a prize or honor as recognition of his or her work, with many re-forged prisoners going on to become *vospitateli* or heads of *trudkollektivy* themselves, re-enacting the process once again with their own students in a ritualistic repetition of the master plot. In Chapter Two, specific examples of these prisoner narratives will be analyzed within this socialist-realist framework.

The ritual phenomenon, which concerns itself so much with beginnings and ends, introduces the violence of life’s transformations into the cultural narratives concerning the Canal, echoing the process of *perekovka*, “The symbolism of death and rebirth lies at the heart of any rite of passage; one self must die so that the other may be born. When the Soviet hero sheds his individualistic self at the moment of passage it could be said that he dies as an individual and is reborn as a function of the collective.”¹⁹⁷ Similarly, when a prisoner undergoes *perekovka*, his old self is supposedly vanished forever and irrecoverable; instead he is now a member of the “working family” of the Soviet Union, indistinguishable from the masses toiling in the name of socialist greatness. Although the form of avant-realist works may be quite different from those within socialist realism, employing avant-garde techniques like collage and shorter narrative forms such as the *ocherk* (sketch), the narrative nugget of ideological transformation endemic to socialist realism is certainly present within these works.

¹⁹⁷ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 174.

1.6 RE-CONSTRUCTING THE “OFFICIAL” AND “NON-OFFICIAL” CATEGORIES

In discussions of the Soviet era, it is very common to use the terms “official” and “non-official” to distinguish underground culture from its state-sponsored counterpart. These terms reveal their severe limitations when employed in discussing the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction. A belief in the absolute quality of this dyad stems from a specific historical moment and was originally used in reference to *samizdat* (self-publishing) during the 1970s dissident movement.¹⁹⁸ While an alternative to the official/non-official construct could be proposed as censored versus non-censored materials, this re-formulation is inadequate, as Yurchak suggests, because it “reduces Soviet reality to a binary division between the state (censored) and the society beyond it (uncensored).”¹⁹⁹ Instead of substituting one binary for another, it is necessary to posit altogether different categories.

Specific examples from the White Sea-Baltic Canal make clear how difficult it is to extricate the official from the non-official; for example, the prisoner Sergei Aymov participated in the collectively-written *History of the Construction* alongside “official,” state-sponsored voices such as Maksim Gor'kii and Leopold Averbakh. This state-ordered OGPU publication,²⁰⁰ however, also contains surprisingly non-official elements: *chastushki*, prison menus, detailed descriptions of criminal life and thieving techniques. Given the need for ideological materials to be invisible and ideally seamless with real life,²⁰¹ the inclusion of such everyday materials could

¹⁹⁸ Yurchak, 6.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ The *Istoriia stroitel'stva* book was officially commissioned by the OGPU, see *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Tov. Stalina* (Belmorstroï: 1933), 11.

²⁰¹ Foulkes, 2.

be explained by the psychological mechanics of propaganda.²⁰² The situation, however, is more complicated than this, since the *History of the Construction* is a singular, highly unusual text that employs a complex set of literary styles and techniques. Not only the artistic texts about the White Sea-Baltic Canal but also the historical reality of its construction point to frequent interaction between the authorities and the prisoners, typically considered the “official” and “non-official” realms. During the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, a “tradition of cooperation between Chekists and skilled prisoners took shape,” which influenced models for later camps where former prisoners actually worked in the central camp apparatus and current prisoners—even those sentenced under article 58—could be living in their own apartments or residences.²⁰³ Despite the relatively friendly relations between Chekists and certain prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, such attitudes became more controversial in the second half of the 1930s, and fraternization between authorities and prisoners became a punishable crime.²⁰⁴

Given the impossibility of a strict distinction between official and non-official, the much simpler categories of prisoner and non-prisoner will be employed here. Although this reconfiguration is technically another binary, this proposition will not erroneously categorize what are very complex issues. Instead, this straightforward model will aid in organization of the materials to be analyzed without distorting them. Some type of division is necessary for a proper analysis of the cultural narratives surrounding the Canal, and these broad categories make the most sense—either you are a prisoner or you are not. This reformulation is not meant to imply

²⁰² Further complicating the situation, the administration would at times quite consciously create seemingly non-official texts. A particularly vivid example is the creation of “fakelore,” or official fakelore. See Frank Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990).

²⁰³ Galina Mikhailovna Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System*, trans. Carol Flath (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 151-52. See also the Chapter Two discussion of Vatslav Dvorzhetskii’s prisoner memoirs, in which he discusses the possibility of actors in the camp theater being permitted to stay at a hotel for periods of weeks or even months.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 151.

that all non-prisoners are alike and all prisoners are alike; just as each category unto itself is not homogeneous, strict boundaries do not exist between the two categories. In addition, the terms “official” and “non-official” will not be disposed of altogether; they will simply not be used as static, oppositional terms but rather as starting points for more in-depth discussions.

Prisoner artworks and memoirs often reiterate the official messages of state-sponsored propaganda, adding to the complexity of this discussion. Should a text be considered “official” if it parrots official themes, even if it might come from an underground source? Should a text not be taken seriously or thought of as “genuine” because it was submitted to camp authorities for review, thus inevitably changing the status of its content? While prisoner enthusiasm was certainly feigned in order to secure material advantages such as better food rations, extra pay, or an early release, I believe it is important to look beyond these motivations and not necessarily assume they were the only driving forces behind the prisoners’ actions. The situation is certainly more complicated than this, and while a prisoner might pen a short autobiography for material gain, the extrapolation of his or her story and details of newly-found Soviet devotion often exceed what would be necessary to secure special privileges. There is a certain amount of genuine enthusiasm among the prisoners for Soviet ideology, even if for no other reason than that the propaganda machine in operation at the Canal was so pervasive and unavoidable that people simply could not be entirely impervious to it, despite all the death and misery surrounding them. There is also evidence of sincere belief in *perekovka* from other Soviet construction projects that used re-forging as an ideological, motivational tool.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Lahusen, 46-52.

Although some of these claims might seem controversial,²⁰⁶ it is important to attempt to understand the prisoners' predicament from a social point of view. Many of these criminal prisoners, who had never had much of a home life or experienced any sense of safety or affection, could find appealing the notion of becoming part of the large Soviet "family," where at last they felt as if they belonged and had some guise of security. Despite cruel treatment and harsh conditions, it is possible to take pride in physical work and human capabilities; after all, if it is not possible to do this, there is not much for which to live within a prison camp. This explains how Ivan Shukhov attacks building a wall in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* as if it were his own handiwork, risking his life and well-being in order to stay late and continue building the wall correctly and evenly.

When the attentive scholar compares documents, it is possible to make an educated deduction, looking for deviations from patterns, about which prisoner might be writing merely to pander to the State and which one has some level of genuine emotion for the Belomor project. It is also possible to risk conditional suppositions about dissatisfaction and even dissent among the prisoners' writings. This speaks to the particular atmosphere at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where the authorities sometimes openly admitted to a surprising degree of powerlessness and disorganization and where some prisoners were able to live rambunctiously, refusing to work and instead playing cards and drinking vodka.²⁰⁷ Rather than a strict master-slave relationship, the

²⁰⁶ Asserting that some prisoners may have genuinely believed in the potential of *perekovka* or taken pride in their contributions to the White Sea-Baltic Canal's construction is in no way meant to belittle or denigrate the real suffering and cruelty that occurred at the camp site. This analysis is only trying to grapple with—and more fully understand—the complex set of issues at work in a more comprehensive and objective way.

²⁰⁷ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004). Document 40 (before 6 September 1934), a report to the head and deputy head of the Gulag, notes the tendency of juvenile delinquents to cause disturbances in prison camps; at Belbaltlag, it was necessary to use armed force to control the minors (124). Such disputes would often arise after card games. In addition, Document 66 (29 April 1940), a memorandum on the disruption of camp life, notes the high level of unruliness at Belbaltlag (218). Although this document is much later, 7 years after the completion of the Canal, a culture of undisciplined behavior

interactions between authorities and prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal occurred during a period when, according to one Gulag scholar, “the dividing line between slave and owner was nearly eradicated and their relations were built on a businesslike, fully amicable foundation.”²⁰⁸

There is no evidence to assume that all voices in support of the regime must necessarily be mendacious, simple masks worn to gain advantages and hide their “true” beliefs. As the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak makes clear, the actors in masks theory sets up yet another problematic binary that is attempting to access the “real” thoughts of a Soviet citizen.²⁰⁹ The complex system of motivations and belief systems inside an individual’s head are inaccessible to the researcher. While it may seem counter-intuitive to believe that prisoners could voice support of an oppressive regime imprisoning them, it is also misguided to assume consistently the opposite in that these prisoner narratives—often with gushing support of the state—are all fictitious tales that hide their “real” opinions. All too often, the *History of the Construction* and other works concerning the White Sea-Baltic Canal are dismissed as mere propaganda that does not merit serious scholarly analysis. Instead, we might consider doing away with such judgments in order to interpret these textual materials and to understand how the mechanisms of propaganda operate. Only this will allow for a richer comprehension of the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction as well as of the Soviet Union. As the opening epigraph of this chapter indicates, the Belomorkanal construction was not intended to be an isolated project or singular experience, but rather to mimic the complex set of allegiances and emotions invoked by the notion of “homeland,” thereby amplifying its symbolic reach and making it possible to draw comparisons between the labor camp and the country as a whole.

had already been in the process of development— a tendency that many of the prisoner-written texts corroborate (to be discussed in chapter 2).

²⁰⁸ Ivanova, 151.

²⁰⁹ Yurchak, 17.

2.0 PRISONER NARRATIVES

Everyone who feels himself capable of doing so is required to compose treatises, epic poems, manifestos, odes, or other compositions dealing with the beauty and grandeur of OneState.

—Evgenii Zamiatin, *We*²¹⁰

Their feet didn't feel the cold, that was the main thing. Nothing else mattered. Even the breeze, light but piercing, couldn't distract them from their work.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*²¹¹

In the re-forging of prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, art—coupled with labor—played an integral role, since creative expression “inspired” by physical work was intended to spur the transformative process of *perekovka*.²¹² Prisoners, therefore, were officially encouraged to participate in a variety of cultural activities; figures and calculations for cultural production were included alongside, and were just as important as, the technical figures regarding the Canal's construction.²¹³ These activities took place across a wide range of media and disciplines—a collage, one might argue, drawing from the material in Chapter One—including everything from

²¹⁰ «Всякий, кто чувствует себя в силах, обязан составить трактаты, поэмы, манифесты, оды или иные сочинения о красоте и величии Единого Государства,» Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Clarence Brown (NY: Penguin, 1993), 3. E. I. Zamiatin, *My. Sochineniia* (Moscow: Kniga, 1988), 7-154, 9.

²¹¹ «В ноги их мороз не брал, это главное, а остальное ничто, ни ветерок легкий, потягивающий – не могли их мыслей отвлечь от кладки,» Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Ralph Parker (NY: Signet, 1988), 79. A. I. Solzhenitsyn, *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (Moscow: Slovo, 2001), 65.

²¹² See *Karelo-Murmanskii krai* 5-6 (1933): 30, for an article on the projected role for art as an inspirational and motivational tool at the camp site.

²¹³ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 47, l. 101.

agitational theater performances to philosophical lectures. For this reason, the prisoner narratives introduced in this chapter will be loosely organized according to medium: Press, Performance, and Page, with the third category focusing on life writing as opposed to newspapers. Despite this system of classification, none of these categories is mutually exclusive of the other, and cultural works regarding the Canal often traverse genres. This cross-contamination becomes apparent in the example of a play entitled *Mister Stupid and the Shockworkers of Belbaltlag* (*Mister Stiupid i udarniki Belbaltlaga*), written by the prisoner N. A. Blium, a work that will be discussed in greater detail over the course of this chapter. Blium's play won a 50-ruble prize in a literary competition organized by the camp newspaper *Perekovka*, and it was subsequently performed on the banks of the Belomorkanal—a performance that is later recalled in the memoirs of a prisoner audience member. Press, Performance, and Page in this instance are all combined, exemplifying the particular hybridity of propagandistic materials; although initially composed of many separate pieces so as to facilitate dissemination, they often coalesce into an organic whole with a singular message.

Despite the frequent presence of ideological content, many of these prisoner artworks are not “propaganda” in the strict sense of the term. The simple fact that they are produced by subjects who are incarcerated precludes a straightforward propagandistic definition. While some prisoner works rather openly criticize the regime in their texts, others have propaganda-like elements either because of enthusiasm for the Canal project or because of a desire to ingratiate themselves with officials. Yet even texts that do not knowingly pass through official hands—such as personal letters and private memoirs—and therefore have no designs on securing privileges, often include echoes of the ideological messages of re-forging and transformation

through labor. These violations of our expectations as readers²¹⁴ allow us to begin to understand prisoner-written materials with a more complex and nuanced approach. The propaganda apparatus of the White Sea-Baltic Canal was so invasive that it could be interpreted as a metaphorical, artistic version of Jeremy Bentham's omniscient and all-pervasive Panopticon, which Michel Foucault likens to a laboratory that "could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behavior, to train or correct individuals," a stunning parallel with the efforts at the White Sea-Baltic Canal.²¹⁵ One Canal historian couches the Canal in somewhat different terms, sarcastically claiming that it was one of the greatest Public Relations campaigns ever undertaken, worthy of study in business school for its many machinations and techniques.²¹⁶ Whatever the analogy, it will become clear in this chapter that the philosophy of re-forging, even given its detractors, was a highly contagious phenomenon.

The divisions of Press, Performance and Page not only facilitate a cross-medium analysis of prisoner artworks, but will also introduce different stylistic groupings according to which these materials can be discussed, including: the documentary mode; the avant-garde aesthetic (that often, as I will argue here, emerges in criminal culture); and the life story as a quasi-religious conversion narrative. The central role of the press in the early 1930s demonstrates the urge for factuality and reportage-style writing in the Soviet Union. Continuing with the metaphor of laboratory introduced in Chapter One, I would assert that the camp served as an experimental locale where the centrality of the press' role could be magnified. The prisoner-run camp newspaper *Perekovka* was an essential, ubiquitous component of the convicts' lives. The

²¹⁴ This hypothetical group to which I am referring would consist of educated, twenty-first-century readers who would likely assume that most citizens of the Soviet Union, given the opportunity and freedom to do so, would openly contest the regime.

²¹⁵ For a further discussion of the Panopticon, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (NY: Random House, 1977), 200.

²¹⁶ Konstantin Gnetnev, conversation with author, 28 March 2007.

paper served as a type of barometer of daily life on the Canal, acknowledging both achievements and deficiencies in the Canal's construction and even including prisoner complaints.²¹⁷

The discussion of performance—here to include *agitbrigady* (agitational brigades) and criminal songs as well as the more formal, prisoner-run theatrical productions on the Canal—will extend the discussion of criminality and its important link to avant-garde aesthetics. One of the most influential organizers of agitational brigades, Igor Terent'ev, was a key member of the futurist movement before his incarceration, and he infused his performances with an avant-garde style. In addition, the theatrical troupes and musical performances were almost entirely composed of the criminal segment of the camp population, and these shows were an accessible format for less-educated convicts who were newly literate.²¹⁸ Since the avant-garde, and futurist, legacy includes a determination to bring art out of museums and onto the street, in turn privileging *blatnoi iazyk* (thieves' jargon), it is understandable how the avant-garde, performative aesthetic, and criminal world could become closely interconnected. The overall project of the avant-garde and the Belomorkanal also had a more general goal in common: re-making the world.

The final category, Page, will include autobiographies, memoirs and letters of Belomorkanal prisoners written both during and after their incarceration. A close analysis of the criminal works in this section will allow for a comparison between the highly patterned narrative of re-forging and the socialist-realist master plot. Contrasting these works with memoirs written by political prisoners, in turn, will demonstrate how these two very different groups of convicts

²¹⁷ «Лагерная печать – могучее орудие в борьбе за досрочное окончание канала.» *Perekovka* 96-97 (22-24 October 1932).

²¹⁸ Not only do audience members' descriptions note the strong criminal component in the make-up of these agitational brigades, but political prisoners sentenced under article 58 would not have been allowed to partake in such performances unless granted special permission.

incorporated similar themes into their works, although they were often written in different styles. The three categories of Press, Performance, and Page will together address such aspects of prisoners' lives as the music of labor (and the labor of music), the camp's ethnic and religious diversity, women's issues, life-writing, and *put'* (path) as the physical unfurling of utopia. The ability to construct oneself through writing and performance at the Belomorkanal inevitably introduces the question of Soviet subjectivity, a phenomenon that—I will argue—has a particular valence at the camp site. Not only is selfhood constructed, it is performed at the White Sea Canal—a performance that is so convincing that the players forget they are acting and in turn become their characters.

2.1 PRESS

2.1.1 Introduction: Realism, the Documentary Aesthetic, and the Camp Newspaper

Before addressing the specific—and highly significant—role of the camp newspaper *Perekovka* for the Belomorkanal project, it is first necessary to acknowledge more generally the reportage mode's importance in Soviet culture. In what Elizabeth Papazian has called “the documentary moment,” a realist aesthetic dominated from the avant-garde movement to the foundation of socialist realism in 1934.²¹⁹ The primacy of factuality informed many aspects of Soviet cultural life, and newspapers, in turn, garnered a privileged role as truth-bearers. The newspaper was so important in early Soviet culture that the constructivist writer Sergei Tret'iakov defined it as the

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Astrid Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois P, 2009), 8.

epic of the time, likening correspondents to a collective, modern-day version of Tolstoy.²²⁰ The predominance of the newspaper in the early 1930s stemmed not only from this new focus on documentary materials but also from the earlier inheritance of the avant-garde aesthetic, which relied heavily on newspaper fragments as a representation of authenticity and the *quotidien*. Collage, which similarly required the insertion of everyday life into art forms, frequently employed the newspaper as material object. The popularity of *Perekovka* at the campsite, therefore, did not seem incidental; rather, it was part of a larger trend towards the blended documentary-aesthetic product. While the discussion here will mainly be limited to the particular case of *Perekovka*, since it was the most popular and widely read newspaper, there were many other newspapers—mainly wall papers (*stengazety*)—at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and the communal reading of newspapers was intended to be a type of social activity at BelBaltLag.

This documentary approach in Soviet culture was so significant because it offered “apparent transparency of transmission of information,” or supposed objectivity, when in reality there was a continuously growing contradiction between fact and artifact.²²¹ This slippage played a particularly important role in the dissemination of propaganda, one of the central cultural objectives at the Canal’s construction. It is precisely this contamination of accuracy that allowed for the infusion of artistic motifs into the documentary aesthetic; just as artistic products of the time exhibited a predilection for the factual—for example, the production novel, which centered its activity around a real-life factory or construction site—so did newspapers have a penchant for poetry and artistic prose. While the former tendency has often been noted, the latter

²²⁰ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Novyi Lev Tolstoi,” *Literatura fakta*, Ed. N. Chuzak (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972), 31-33.

²²¹ Papazian, 6.

is as yet to be fully recognized in scholarly discourse, and offers an interesting example of how this documentary impulse truly permeated all aspects of Soviet life.

The role of art in the camp newspaper *Perekovka* was absolutely essential. The newspaper held literary competitions and encouraged literacy by training convicts to read and write and employing prisoners as the correspondents for the paper (*lagkory*). Only the best workers, however, were allowed to occupy the privileged position of camp correspondent; as one inscription on a smattering of wall newspapers reads, “every shock-worker is a camp correspondent, every camp correspondent is a shock-worker” (*kazhdyi udarnik lagkor, kazhdyi lagkor udarnik*). Despite—or perhaps because of—the high status of being a camp correspondent, the paper actively recruited new candidates for such positions; an advertisement for *lagkory* in *Perekovka* requested that those interested in the job send along their full name, article of crime, length of sentence, and any previous newspaper experience.²²² In nearly every issue of the newspaper, there are examples of poetry, short stories, or other pieces of creative writing. Alongside such creative pieces are more traditional newspaper articles, containing facts and figures of plan-fulfillment and work collective output, and the very different realms of poetry and production appear side-by-side on the newspaper’s pages. Since most other Gulag newspapers do not exhibit quite this degree of factual-cultural hybridity, *Perekovka* is a particularly acute example of an aestheticized documentary style and strengthens the idea of the Canal site as an experimental laboratory for Soviet culture.

In the citation from Evgenii Zamiatin’s *We* (*My*, 1927) that serves as an epigraph to this chapter, the narrator of the novel is copying “word for word” (*slovo v slovo*) a proclamation that appears in the newspaper the *One State Gazette* (*Gosudarstvennaia Gazeta*). In Zamiatin’s

²²² *Perekovka* 40 (11 June 1932), 7.

fictional “One State” (*Edinoe Gosudarstvo*) where the “Benefactor” (*Blagodetel'*) rules supreme, the role of the newspaper is integral in both perpetuating the ideals of the regime and soliciting poetry and other artworks in its name. This imaginary situation is quite similar to the reality at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where *Perekovka* fulfills a similar function, and—despite being prisoner-operated and edited—serves as a mouthpiece for the state. The scholar Alla Gorcheva cites *Perekovka* as the birth of the Gulag press in her monograph on the subject, and she notes three primary goals for the newspaper: socialist labor and competition, prisoner enthusiasm, and strengthening of party organizations.²²³ I would expand this list by including perhaps what is the most important feature of the newspaper: art. Although published creative works may be in the name of socialist labor or inspired by prisoner enthusiasm, they are nevertheless a distinctive element of the camp newspaper's *raison d'être*.

2.1.2 Sergei Aymov: Editor of *Perekovka*

One of the most prominent editors of *Perekovka*, Sergei Aymov, was first and foremost a literary persona known as the “Belomorkanal poet,”²²⁴ and he frequently contributed poetry to the camp newspaper. Despite being a political prisoner, Aymov was perhaps the most well-known figure at the White Sea-Baltic Canal and practically a celebrity; in one essay mailed into the newspaper, a camp inmate described fighting over a poetry collection in order to read aloud Aymov's poetry.²²⁵ In addition to serving as the camp newspaper's editor, Aymov also

²²³ Alla Gorcheva, *Pressa GULaga* (Moscow: Izd. Moskovskogo universiteta, 1996), 42-49.

²²⁴ On the back of a stylized portrait of Aymov there is written the caption: “Belomorskii kanal. Poet velikoi stroiki.” (Belomor Canal. Poet of the grand construction.). RGALI, f. 1885, op. 1, d. 160, l. 7.

²²⁵ RGALI, f. 1185, op. 3, d. 33, l. 109-10.

carefully documented criminal slang,²²⁶ collected games and charades on the Canal, wrote a detailed diary, and fielded complaints and requests from other prisoners. His notebooks, in turn, are a type of montage, with drawings, facts and figures, vocabulary lists, conversation fragments, miniature biographies, and diary entries all included within one text.²²⁷

With his prominent status and proximity to the Canal administration, Alymov served as a mediator between officials and prisoners. This rather unusual status demonstrates how indistinct the boundary between prisoner and non-prisoner could be at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. In his autobiography written in January of 1948 (located in the RGALI archive), Alymov recounts his several arrests and imprisonments across Russia; ironically, however, he excludes entirely any mention of his time on the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Instead, he stresses his many travels (including to Australia and the Far East) as a sort of formative education à la Gorky, where he has a multiplicity of humble trades (he notes a total of sixteen unskilled professions), including stevedore, lumberjack, digger, fisherman and boot cleaner.²²⁸ Alymov subsequently became a well-known songwriter after his release from prison, and he remained in favor with Stalin, who gave Alymov's mother and children a handsome pension after the poet's death.²²⁹

In terms of his poetry—all of which seems to glorify the grandeur of the Belomorkanal construction—one of his most infectious metaphors is the building of the Canal as the “wedding of seas” (*svad'ba morei*), which serves as the inspiration for several poems, including “Svad'ba morei” and “B. M. S.” (an abbreviation for the Belomor construction) and is included in his

²²⁶ Alymov's collection of criminal slang shows his predilection for linguistics. Alymov makes notations about criminal language in a highly organized manner, including word variations, roots, and examples of usage in sentences as well as entire conversations in thieves' jargon.

²²⁷ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 25.

²²⁸ RGALI, f. 1885, d. 1, op. 1, 1-2.

²²⁹ Gorcheva, 43.

notes and observations about the Canal.²³⁰ Other prisoners also explore this idea of romance between two bodies of water; perhaps one of the most sentimental prisoner submissions is a series of imaginary love letters between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea, entitled “The Love of Two Seas” (*Liubov' dvukh morei*). In this “correspondence,” the Baltic Sea writes to the White Sea that they have loved each other for thousands of years, and the hundreds of kilometers separating them has been a great source of despair. Now, however, thanks to Bolshevik intervention, their “stormy hearts” (*burnye serdtsa*) would soon be calmed by their union.²³¹

“The Wedding of Seas” was also suggested, but apparently not used, as a title for a collection of prisoner poetry. The suggestion most likely became the title of the extant volume of prisoner poetry published in 1932 titled *We Will Unite the Seas! (Moria soedinim!)*. This “wedding” was not the only way in which the Canal is figured romantically; in their autobiographies, many prisoners expressed a fervent type of love for the Canal, one that replaced the familial and spousal relationships they had left behind. One prisoner wrote in his diary, “BBVP (acronym for *Belomor-Baltiiskii Vodnyi Put'*, or the White-Baltic Waterway)...these four letters are pronounced with love by the prisoners. Exactly like the name of a beloved girl.”²³² It is significant that love—arguably the most common theme of and inspiration for artistic expression—here must be recast with an aquatic, cold substitute. In addition to this romantic theme, Alymov’s poetry also frequently contains musical motifs. The role of music is also prominent in other prisoner artworks, and the auditory pattern is a thread that will be followed in all three sections of this chapter as an important element in the performance of identity.

²³⁰ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 18, l. 1-2 and d. 21, l. 135.

²³¹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 306.

²³² «ББВП. Четыре буквы...Их с любовью произносят лагерники. Точно имя любимой девушки.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 155.

With Sergei Alymov at its head, the newspaper *Perekovka* fulfills many functions at the camp site and is glorified in many different arenas. It is highlighted in a documentary film about the Canal, where the printing press is shown with an intertitle claiming it as “one of the most important machines in the transformation of people.”²³³ The glossy journal *USSR under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*) quotes the newspaper, makes clear it is the prisoners’ “own,” and underscores its role as an essential organ in their transformation.²³⁴ Given the title of the newspaper itself, it is not surprising that its primary function was to be the metaphorical refashioning of people. The newspaper is praised in the prisoner poetry volume, *We Will Unite the Seas!*, in which multiple poems are dedicated to the newspaper: one discusses the general importance and ubiquity of the paper, one is dedicated to the camp correspondents who work at the paper, and another—in a type of pastiche—includes quotations of poetry from the paper itself.²³⁵

Newspapers often function as elements of collage, and the same holds true for *Perekovka*. Some literary or cultural works from the Canal simply cited the newspaper, while others had pieces of the publication literally glued into their texts. One example is the copy of the *History of the Construction* held in the GARF archive, where one can see pieces of *Perekovka* cut and adhered to the manuscript’s margins.²³⁶ The newspaper also functioned as a mouthpiece for matters on the Canal, since prisoners could send their letters of complaint, concern, or praise to

²³³ RGAKFD, No. 3878, *Port piati morei*, dir. Aleksandr Lemberg, 1932-33. “Un des machines les plus importantes, pour transformer les gens.” The fact that the film’s subtitles are entirely in French indicates that this film was intended for an international audience and shows how the publicity campaign in the name of the White Sea-Baltic Canal was not limited just to the Soviet Union but was meant to captivate and woo the world.

²³⁴ «Они имели свой клуб, свою читальню, и даже печатную газету *Перековка*.» The use of the pronoun “svoi” here emphasizes that the cultural institutions at the camp site belong to the prisoners themselves. *SSSR na stroike* 12 (1933): 18, 25-26.

²³⁵ The poems from the collection *Moria soedinim!*, “Perekovka”(41); “Lagkoram” (43); insertion of citations from *Perekvovka* (44), Belmorstroï: 1932.

²³⁶ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7., d. 72, l. 1, 42.

the editors. The publication of one such letter regarding the prisoner work ethic served as an inspiration for a new slogan on the Canal, “a shock-worker is not a chicken and does not fear the rain” (*udarnik ne kuritsa–dozhdia ne boitsia*).²³⁷ An October 1932 issue was dedicated to the newspaper itself and proclaimed that the two-year construction of the Canal accompanied the two-year-long struggle for the new, re-forged human being; in a drawing, a stack of the newspapers is pictured next to the Eiffel Tower (and is just as tall!), and a quotation of some shock-workers notes that “their” newspaper “made them into people” (*Perekovka sdelala nas liudmi!*).²³⁸ One early-released prisoner, A. P. Kupriianova, sent a letter of admiration and praise for the Canal to Aymov, asking for its publication in *Perekovka* so that everyone could understand that the feats possible in the Soviet Union would be unthinkable in any bourgeois country. Kupriianova requested that her letter be published in the paper because she recognized it as a way to reach “all camp prisoners” (*vsem lagernikam*), demonstrating the influence and wide reach of the paper.²³⁹ An entire collection of prisoner-written letters (some written on the back of the camp’s library order forms) ascribed to the newspaper their supposed transformations: one prisoner thanked the newspaper for allowing him to become literate and so change into a new person (a sentence highlighted in red on the hand-written letter, most likely pleasing to the editorial board); another prisoner included a list of the best *udarniki*; a third convict divulged his life story, citing orphanhood after the Russian Civil War as the central

²³⁷ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 51, l. 6.

²³⁸ «Что говорит ударники БМС о своей газете.» Again, the use of the pronoun “svoi” makes it apparent that the newspaper belongs to the prisoners themselves. *Perekovka* 96-97 (22-24 October 1932).

²³⁹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 142.

reason for his life of crime. Some of this correspondence, replete with laboriously-scrawled letters, was clearly written by newly literate prisoners.²⁴⁰

2.1.3 *Perekovka* Literary Competitions as Artistic Smithy

While *Perekovka* fulfilled numerous functions at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, its role as cultural, artistic disseminator is the most relevant to this research. *Perekovka* artistically inserted itself into the lives of prisoners through its organization of literary competitions. While the paper published poetry alongside what was submitted for contests (most frequently Alymov's own verse), these competitions served as an important generator of cultural texts and publishable material for the newspaper. Most importantly, these competitions demonstrated the particular attitude towards artistic participation that was developed at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Just as hard labor was to inspire prisoners to poetic heights, so the creation of artistic materials in honor of the Canal was meant to make convicts work harder. Yet the June 11, 1932 issue of *Perekovka* announcing a literary competition in honor of the great feats accomplished at the construction site was actually filled with reports about the inadequate efforts of the laborers, with article headlines such as: "What explains this unallowable inactivity? The third month in which one of the most important shock-worker decisions is not fulfilled" and "The work tempo in all divisions is completely unsatisfactory."²⁴¹ The coupling of such negative news regarding prisoner output with a call for works aggrandizing the Canal demonstrates both how art was meant to improve prisoners' work ethic and why "reality" was so paradoxical, since the newspaper requested

²⁴⁰ Since in the Russian language it is required, not optional, to write in cursive while handwriting, those who attempt to write in the normally-printed block letters are exhibiting their unfamiliarity with literacy. RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 39, l. 5-10.

²⁴¹ «Чем объяснить это недопустимое бездействие? Третий месяц не выполняется одно из важнейших решений ударников» and «Темпы работ по насыпи во всех отделениях совершенно недостаточны,» 7.

stories that blatantly contradicted its own reporting. The notion of performance here comes into play; despite whatever the actual situation was, the prisoners—by engaging in the truth-producing and power-creating act of writing—could act out a different reality, thereby internalizing it. The editors perhaps realized the power of such an exercise, which explains why it was even more important to encourage Canal-praising texts precisely at a time when the construction's progress was suffering.

It is perhaps because of this disjuncture between expectation and truth that the first call for submissions was a complete flop. The competition was originally advertised on 11 June 1932 with three monetary prizes offered for each of three different categories of works: short story or *feuilleton* (250, 150, and 100 rubles), play (300, 200, and 100 rubles), and short forms such as sketch or “living newspaper”²⁴² (75, 50, and 30 rubles). Yet the deadline had to be extended from 1 July 1932 to 1 August 1932, presumably because they had not received enough submissions. Even with the new August deadline, the paper received only eighteen poems, seventeen plays, and twenty-five sketches. Prisoners most likely had a difficult time composing artistic works at the end of a ten-hour day unearthing rock, even with the appeal of a monetary prize. In addition, the prisoners submitting works could not write on any topic of their choosing; specific themes were suggested for the materials, all of which were related to the construction of the Canal and have militant descriptions: the “heroics of struggle” (*geroika bor'by*) for the on-time completion of the Canal; the “struggle” (*bor'ba*) for shock-worker labor; and the “struggle” (*bor'ba*) for quality in construction. The panel of judges was printed in the newspaper, and since

²⁴² The “living newspaper” is an unusual and interesting form of Soviet agitational theater that requires further definition. In order to keep illiterate audiences apprised of news events, these acting performances included short sketches on current events, with the actors having highly visible props to identify their characters: a large top hat for a capitalist, a big red pencil for a bureaucrat. The performances also often included song and dance, and given their primitive design, were highly mobile. Lynn Mally, “Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater,” *Slavic Review* 2 (2003): 324-42, 325-26.

the group included camp officials in addition to prisoner representatives of *Perekovka*, this perhaps further discouraged convicts from participating. The works eventually culled by the 1 August deadline were not, in the editors' opinion, of high enough quality to merit prizes. Instead, the workers were encouraged to continue reading and writing, and to re-submit later.²⁴³ Despite the announcement of some prizes in the 21 August issue, none of the pieces won the full award money because of the texts' supposed inferior quality, indicating the editors' preference for aesthetic quality over ideological content.

The editors' impressions about the submitted works make their artistic standards clear; for example, the hand-written notes regarding the poetry and theater submissions indicate a certain amount of literary discrimination: "helpless" (*bespomoshchnaia*), "not poetry" (*ne stikhi*), "word choice in places as illiterate and ungifted" (*nabor slov mestami bezgramotno, bezdarno* [sic]), "nonsense!!!" (*erunda*), "boring piece" (*nudnaia veshch'*). Any complimentary notations are very moderate in tone, such as "pretty good piece" (*veshch' sdelana neplokho*).²⁴⁴ By contrast, virtually no narrative notations are made in terms of the ideological correctness of the content, and if there are passages that would clearly be offensive to the administration, they are simply underlined. This discrimination on the part of the editors will become important as individual participants in the competition are examined, since the judges' reactions offer important indications of the ideological expectations at the time.

²⁴³ *Perekovka* 40 (11 June 1932): 6.

²⁴⁴ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 28, l. 6.

2.1.4 A Chorus of *Perekovka* Prize-Winners: Blium, Mel'nikov, and Kremkov

In light of such aesthetic criticism on the part of the judges, what works actually received prizes? Some of the choices seem surprising given the fact that *Perekovka* has the primary function of ideologically indoctrinating the incarcerated. In this section, prize-winning selections will be discussed according to their different media: N. A. Blium's theatrical play, G. Mel'nikov's sketch, and Kremkov's experimental hymn. Within this diversity, however, lies a consistency in terms of themes and motifs. All three pieces address in some sort of fashion auditory motifs: Blium's play would be performed for an audience, Mel'nikov's sketch discusses the birth of new sounds on the Canal and uses onomatopoeia to suggest such a genesis, and Kremkov categorizes his short experimental work as a hymn. The aural thematic establishes a strong connection to physical labor as well as to collectivity (as with a chorus or symphony, in which many voices are joined into one). Not by chance, one of the most famous photographs from the White Sea-Baltic Canal is Aleksandr Rodchenko's image of an orchestra playing on the banks of the waterway. The photograph is striking not only for its odd coupling of high culture and hard labor, but also as evidence of the musical theme's significance in the Canal's cultural narratives.

It is now time to return to the prisoner N. A. Blium's play *Mister Stupid and the Shock-Workers of Belbaltlag*, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, since it is both a prize-winner in the competition and somewhat unusual from an ideological standpoint. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this play is its character names, all of which are English words transliterated into Cyrillic characters. In a manner reminiscent of eighteenth-century satire by the Russian playwright Denis Fonvizin, the names reflect something about the personality of the character or the subject matter of the play, albeit with English—and not Russian—words, thereby disguising their negative connotations. The main characters include: Sir Austin Waterproof (*Ser Ostin*

Voterpruf) and his wife Lady Waterproof (*Ledi Voterpruf*) along with the Copper (*Kopper*) couple, and the two journalists Mister Hardbrain (*Mister Khardbrein*) and Stupid (*Stiupid*). Half of these names is related to water and an attempt to control it—Waterproof, Copper—and the other half insinuates that those who work in the newspaper industry are, to put it mildly, not the most intelligent creatures—Hardbrain, Stupid. If the potentially insulting names for the journalist main characters (ironically sent into a *newspaper* literary competition) were meant to be a joke directed at the panel of judges, the humor was lost, or at least not seen as offensive, along the way: The piece won a 50-ruble prize in the contest.

Set in England, the play begins with a discussion on the future of the Soviet Union and communism, with Mister Copper arguing on the side of the Russians, praising the phenomenon of shock-worker labor, and Hardbrain claiming that prisoners work in “awful conditions” (*uzhasnykh usloviakh*) in concentration camps in northern Russia. In order to resolve the matter once and for all, Stupid is sent to the Soviet Union as a newspaper correspondent to investigate. Stupid sends telegrams back to England describing the marvelous conditions at the camp site, which at first he could not believe was a prison; he realizes the cramped buildings he assumed to be prisoners’ quarters are actually greenhouses, he talks to convicts walking around with no guards, and he observes orchestral accompaniment on the work site. While the latter two elements certainly were true of BelBaltLag, the overall description of the camp is clearly exaggerated optimism. Stupid loves the prison so much, in fact, that he decides to stay and never returns to England, claiming that he has found a real utopia; Hardbrain cannot believe it and wants to send someone to look for him in the Soviet Union. Once again, while the connotations of the story are clearly positive, a moderate amount of reading between the lines reveals a different significance. Surely, it is not entirely coincidental that the character who visits and falls

in love with the White Sea-Baltic Canal is named “Stupid,” just as the one who refuses to believe in the potential of the place is called “Hardbrain.” Similarly, the fact that Stupid never returns from the Canal—despite the explanation that he loved it so much he did not want to leave—has a chilling resonance with real-life disappearances in the Soviet Union. Despite its generally positive representation of the Canal, the fact that such a play would not only be accepted by the editors but actually be selected for a prize shows the potential for a certain malleability and even humor among the judges, since they most certainly understood the English words.²⁴⁵

The prisoner G. Mel'nikov's sketch entitled “From the White (Sea) to the Baltic (Sea)” (*Ot belogo do baltiiskogo*) presents a different, shorter format than Blum's play. The *ocherk* (sketch) is a very important narrative form in Russian literature, and its blending of fiction and fact allows for the incorporation of varied materials. Often the sketch takes the form of a travel narrative, as the title of Mel'nikov's text would suggest. This shorter, semi-fictional format seems more conducive to the standard ideological motifs of the Canal, as opposed to the more comical approach evident in Blum's purely fictional play.²⁴⁶ As would be standard for a travel narrative, the text opens with a description of the landscape—one that is surprisingly negative and nonchalant: “The North! How boring is everything, how not fun and monotonous.”²⁴⁷ The author attributes this boredom to the endless train ride and the persistence of the train wheels sounding out in the onomatopoeia “tuk-tuk, tuk-tuk.” The view from the train window is unchanging, its square similar to the frame of a “photograph hanging in a room for ten years,”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Alymov, one of the main editors of the newspaper, definitely understood English. His notebooks and diaries contain vocabulary lists of English words and notes about works he is reading in English. Some of the words included in Alymov's vocabulary list for reading the play *City of the Plague* are weaklings, subtle, suave, mild, desperate, defeat, fear, gild, and glut. RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 21, l. 118.

²⁴⁶ The sketch as travel narrative will be discussed further in Chapter Three, where the argument is made to consider the *History of the Construction* as precisely this type of ideological document.

²⁴⁷ «Север [sic] как все скучно, как невесело и монотонно.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 141.

²⁴⁸ «В квадрате окна, как в рамке старой фотографии десять лет висящей в комнате, все одно и тоже.» Ibid.

but this ennui is replaced by enthusiasm when Mel'nikov arrives at the camp site and, on the “commemorative” (*pamiatnyi*) day of 22 April 1932, he and his fellow train passengers become builders of the White-Baltic Sea Waterway.²⁴⁹ The description of the train ride is often hellish in prisoner narratives, frequently worse than the physical work itself; Alymov, for example, despite being such a devotee of the Canal's construction, describes the train trip horrifically in his notebooks: “The scariest trip that was ever made on earth. Hell on wheels. Without any of Dante's poetry. Night and its horrors—thefts, stuffiness. Bodies on bodies. Cries: ‘Oh, my sugar was taken...my basket was ripped...thieves scurry like rats.’”²⁵⁰

Unlike the play *Mister Stupid*, Mel'nikov's sketch exemplifies the Canal project's ethos in a more obvious manner, including the importance of work stimulation, the feeling of collectivity among the workers, the physicality of hard labor, the psychology of the red and black boards, the potential for re-birth, and the use of militant diction. The prisoner compares the workers on a Canal to a giant ant colony, all of whom are working together as a unified mass, inspired by labor. Despite this suggestion of cohesiveness, Mel'nikov unwittingly acknowledges the diversity of the Canal population by enumerating the various nationalities and ethnicities, “On the path of the grand route there are not Uzbeks, Tatars, Armenians, Ukrainians, Russians, Georgians, Belorussians, Poles and Germans—here there are only soldiers in the Canal army and their commanders.”²⁵¹ With its battle terminology, this example illustrates the notion of unity through diversity that reappears in many of the texts concerning the Canal project. Individuals

²⁴⁹ Symbolically, this day is also Lenin's birthday, doubling the ideological significance of the date the prisoners begin their work.

²⁵⁰ «Самое страшное путешествие которое когда либо кто совершал на земле. Ад на колесах. Без всякой дантовской поэзии. Ночь и ее ужасы – кражи, духота. Тела на телах. Крики: –ай у меня сахар забрали...корзину прорезали...воры шмигают как крысы.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 23, l. 1.

²⁵¹ «На трассе великого пути нет узбеков, татир, армян, украинцев, русских, грузин, белоруссов, поляков, и немцев, здесь только бойцы армии канала, и их командиры.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 143.

from diverse backgrounds fight in the name of a singular cause, just as their artistic works of varying styles exhibit a similar, unified message.²⁵²

Notwithstanding his enthusiastic praise for the Canal project, Mel'nikov does include complaints in his essay. He cites the near impossibility of staying warm, the complete exhaustion of muscles, and the perennial presence of hunger as commonplace on the Canal.²⁵³ He also provides a fuller description of the prisoners' work ethic, switching from the emphasis on worker collectivity to the infiltration of two loafers named Rus and Mailov. After the two were subjected to a week of taunting by the rest of the work collective, they finally decided to start working. This is precisely the kind of psychological atmosphere the authorities wanted to create; a den of peer pressure where fellow prisoners began acting more like administrators than convicts, because they knew the group's collective work output depended upon the work completed by each individual member. So the "patience" (*terpenie*) of Mel'nikov's brigade finally gives out, and they decide to show Rus and Mailov how to work, an effort that is couched in pedagogical terms: they decide "to teach" (*pouchit'*) those who are not producing and their "studies" (*ucheba*) begin the moment they arrive in the work brigade. This pedagogical terminology echoes the efforts of the *vospitateli* at the Belomorkanal, who see their task of re-forging as an educational process.

Mel'nikov is so proud of this system and the way the Canal is being constructed that he compares it with other supposedly failed—and more importantly, capitalist—construction projects. He claims the Panama and Suez Canals will be "sad poetry from that land" (*mrachnoi*

²⁵² Interestingly, the idea of "unity through diversity" is one that holds an important position in the Russian Orthodox Church. Rather than seeing unity and diversity as two opposing constructs, Church doctrine argues that the diversity of the autocephalous structure of the Church is unified through the singular message of the Church's teaching and traditions, allowing what are two contrasting notions to become complementary ones. See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (NY: Penguin, 1997). The idea of unity through diversity is an important one to this research, and it will continue to be explored throughout the dissertation.

²⁵³ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 143-44.

poezii etogo kraia) since the Panama Canal is merely a “route to gold” (*put' k zolotu*) and the Suez is a sandy grave for the bones of Blacks and Arabs (ironically, the image of building on bones became a trademark of the Belomorkanal itself).²⁵⁴ While these capitalist experiences supposedly represent a pathway to destruction, misery, and death, the White Sea-Baltic Canal is a place of birth and beginnings, where new sounds and a new way of life are born; the project is both literally and figuratively a birth canal. The emphasis on birth (*rozhdenie*)²⁵⁵ naturalizes the construction of the Canal, allowing for the highly-unnatural ideological construct of *perekovka* to appear like an organic re-birth. Nevertheless, the industrial connotations of such refashioning remain; the camp site is described by prisoners as a “smithy” (*kuznitsa*)²⁵⁶ for new potential, and the term re-forging refers in a literal sense to the smelting of metals.

Mel'nikov specifically cites new sounds (*zvuki*) as being born on the Canal, and audible motifs pepper his entire essay, serving as its aesthetic backbone; there is the *tuk-tuk* of the train wheels that form the opening onomatopoeia and there is the final observation, very poetically rendered, of all the various sounds at BelBaltLag: the cry of beasts and the occasional firing of a hunter's gun, the resounding whistle of train engines hurriedly speeding along with their deliveries, the nighttime cries of forest and lake, the knock of shovels, the ring of picks, and the bump of pile-drivers; all of these sounds compose the “new symphony of the new life” (*novaia simfoniia novoi zhizni*).²⁵⁷ Although Mel'nikov vividly engages many senses in his essay—sight with the tedious landscape, touch with the feel of callouses and freezing cold—hearing remains most important. Mel'nikov's essay, therefore, demonstrates different motifs on the level of

²⁵⁴ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 148.

²⁵⁵ Many prisoner-written texts liken the birth of the Canal to the re-birth of humans. Alymov makes such a comparison in his notebooks during the Canal's opening celebration (RGALI, f. 1885, op. 5, d. 22, l. 5) and a prisoner-submitted short story for a literary competition, entitled “The Birth of the Canal” (*Rozhdenie kanala*) makes the same analogy (RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 222).

²⁵⁶ See the prisoner-written essay of the same name, RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 134.

²⁵⁷ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 149.

content and form. While the content may be ideological in more of a classically socialist-realist way, the form, with its onomatopoeic devices and layering of sounds, has more commonalities with an avant-garde aesthetic. This slippage between form and content occurs frequently with prisoners' artworks and exemplifies the idea of "avant-realism" discussed in Chapter One. This disparity also applies to the textual selections in this chapter, since the prize-winners selected for discussion here are diverse in format yet similar in content.

The third (and final) example of a prize-winner, the prisoner Kremkov, is author of a short piece entitled "Tournament of Labor" (*Turnir truda*), which offers yet another, quite different, format among the prize-winning pieces. Remaining consistent in thematic motifs, however, it includes a significant auditory with its subtitle, "Hymn to Labor Competition" (*Gimn trudovomu sorevnovaniuu*). This more schematic, condensed piece repeats the word "competition" (*sorevnovanie*) with different definitions and clarifications: it is the key to victory, the path to the better world of socialism, or with it the entire world can be rebuilt. The piece clearly pleased the editors, who wrote "conscious" (*soznatel'nyi*) across the submission in blue wax pencil, in one of the rare instances of ideological commentary on a work. The repetition of the word "competition" on nearly every line represents the literary device of amplification while also rendering the text akin to a slogan or ditty. Both the form and the content, therefore, would likely appeal to the panel of judges; not only does the piece stress work competition—the backbone of production at the Canal—but it also uses a highly stylized format, replete with repetition and dashes,²⁵⁸ mirroring the futurist Igor' Terent'ev's poetry.²⁵⁹ This invocation of the avant-garde is also present in works that the judges found unappealing. The short piece "How to

²⁵⁸ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 286-88.

²⁵⁹ For further clarification, see the discussion of Terent'ev and "lito-montazh" in the Performance category of this chapter.

Build a Waterway at the Belomor Construction” (*Kak stroiat vodnyi put' na Belmorstroe*) with its unusual format (a series of chants and replies), exhibits avant-garde characteristics and has “boring” (*skuchno*) written across it by the editors. Surprisingly, however, the piece won a prize, and its aural format of essentially a parade of voices likens the piece stylistically to other winners in the literary competition.

2.1.5 Non-Prize-Winner: The Potential Subversion of Iosif Kitchner

While it is important, and at times even surprising, to acknowledge which works won the camp newspaper literary competitions, it is also necessary to contrast these texts with works that did not win any prizes. Although most of the non-prize-winners still portray the White Sea-Baltic Canal and its machinations in a positive light, there are a few exceptions where daring convicts openly criticize the regime. Iosif Kitchner, a prisoner of the first *lagpunkt*, wrote the short story “The Moan of Stones,” (*Ston kamnei*), which will serve as the primary text under discussion in the non-prize-winner section due to its aesthetic value and psychological acumen. Although obviously quite different in tone and content from the prize-winners, the story does employ auditory devices to a high degree in what is a stylistic parallel with the earlier-discussed submissions. Despite the controversial content in “The Moan of Stones” and other pieces, the editors seem to have a rather relaxed attitude towards such deviational texts; the judges make no commentary on Kitchner’s controversial piece, only underlining particularly inflammatory passages. In another instance of tepid editorial reaction, the short story “Breaking Point” (*Perelom*) about two criminals who disdain working on the Canal and claim the camp site will be

their grave, has only the rather tepid editorial comment written across it, “primitive” (*primitivno*).²⁶⁰

“The Moan of Stones” provides a nuanced and critical view of prisoner behavior. The seemingly autobiographical short story is about a kulak named Aleksandr Donskoi, sentenced under article 58. He arrives at the White Sea-Baltic Canal after serving time in other prisons, most likely for what the narrator calls his “bold tongue” (*smelyi iazyk*). Immediately upon his arrival, he has the premonition that the landscape will be a place of death—a feeling that troubles him all the more when he realizes that the others around him are silent, and “not merely silent but actually take part in the administration and help the production.”²⁶¹

Yet Donskoi also undergoes a transformation, although it is not the typical story of re-forging in which a lazy prisoner suddenly finds dignity in work; instead, the main character becomes sluggish and indifferent to everything around him, a wordless and obedient piece of machinery. Although he attempts to fight against this phenomenon, he finds himself “sinking under the universal pressure of slavery.”²⁶² Eventually, as the story explains, he becomes like those around him, with an almost primitive mentality towards work and obligation. Donskoi’s ability to function silently as a cog in the machine does not imply that he harbors any true enthusiasm for the project; he does not read or occupy himself with cultural matters, and he only finds comfort in his dreams.

Dreams and sleep are a frequent motif in the prisoner narratives from the Canal project, since they offer one of the few escapes from tedious prison life. In a short story entitled “Bura”

²⁶⁰ «Здесь нам будет гроб.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 298.

²⁶¹ «А люди молчат...да, не только молчат, а сами, сами участвуя в управлении, помогает производству.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 98.

²⁶² «Но не встречая ни в ком поддержке под давлением страшного пресса всеобщего рабства, Донской постепенно уступали и становился сам тем, что приближало человека к его первобытному состоянию.» Ibid.

written by the prisoner Mikhail Koldobenko, for example, a criminal suffers through sleepless nights, thinking about his past life and how most of his friends have likely forgotten about him.²⁶³ The profound pleasure of sleep is matched by the extreme stress associated with its absence. Sleeplessness, however, can also have a positive valence; in another unpublished short story entitled “The Factory of Life” (*Fabrika zhizni*) and signed by the prisoner “Endi”²⁶⁴ Dmitriev, the narrator discusses sleepless nights in order to demonstrate devotion to the project: “The windows of the little town *Belomorstoi* do not know dreams. In the rooms calculators chirp like starlings. Inclined on drafting tables are old and young faces. Why are these sleepless people doing a work project? What motivates them? Words? Money?”²⁶⁵ In Andrei Platonov’s aforementioned novel *The Foundation Pit* dreams individuate the builders of the All-Proleterian Home:

Every worker dreams his own dreams at night—some represent the fulfillment of a wish, while others are premonitions of lying in a coffin in a clay grave—but they each of them gets through the day in one and the same stooped manner, all doggedly digging the earth, so as to plant in a fresh abyss the eternal stone root of a building designed to last forever.²⁶⁶

Returning to Kitchner’s story, the difficult, physical labor shackles Donskoi’s brain and eventually, along with camp life in general, paralyzes him as a human being. Bit by bit, the main

²⁶³ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 120.

²⁶⁴ This is most likely a *klichka*, or nickname for the English first name Andy. Criminal prisoners often assumed nicknames that were proper names in foreign languages.

²⁶⁵ «Окна городка БМС не знают сна. В комнатах скворцами трещат арифмометры. Над чертежными досками склонены старые и молодые лица. Здесь делают рабочий проект на чем основаны [sic] бессонные ночи этих людей? Что побуждает их? Слова? Деньги?» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 285.

²⁶⁶ Platonov, Trans. Robert Chandler and Geoffrey Smith, 54. «Разные сны представляются трудящемуся по ночам – одни выражают исполненную надежду, другие предчувствуют собственный гроб в глинистой могиле; но дневное время проживается одинаковым, сгорбленным способом – терпением тела, роющего землю, чтобы посадить в свежую пропасть вечный, каменный корень неразрушимого зодчества.» Platonov, 66.

character claims, a person becomes a piece of laboring livestock; nevertheless, Donskoi is not entirely broken and still has “the spark of human love for freedom” (*iskra chelovecheskoi k svobode*) in spite of the harassment—and heavy hand—of his fellow brigade worker who is an avid *urka* (criminal prisoner). These thugs, as the narrator notes, are ubiquitous, devilish and strong. A similar portrayal of criminals occurs in another non-published fictional submission, the aforementioned “The Factory of Life” (*Fabrika zhizni*), where the abysmally long train ride into the dark Karelian landscape is punctuated by the crude language of the criminals: “In their stories, sprinkled with vile language, there was quite a bit of open cynicism, bragging and fabrication. The sinewy *pakhan* recounted his thefts and escapes from prisons [...] the thieves laughed enthusiastically after all of his stories.”²⁶⁷ Even though Dimitriev’s story portrays a positive atmosphere at the Canal, claiming it is a factory of life, where absolutely “unusual, miraculous conversions” (*strannye, neobychnyye prevrashcheniia*) occur, the narrator seems disturbed by the rough and raw character of the criminal prisoners.²⁶⁸

In addition to brazenly assessing prisoners’ work ethics, the narrator in “The Moan of Stones,” through the voice of Donskoi, makes clear the power and cruelty of the criminal population at the Canal. Since the criminals are the primary targets for *perekovka*, they are also more likely to become shock-workers and to be assigned the duties of cultural-educational workers. In fact, official documents completely deny membership in work collectives to any prisoner convicted of counter-revolutionary acts (article 58). The only exceptions to be made to

²⁶⁷ «В их рассказах, пересыпанных сквернословием, было немало откровенного цинизма, хвастовства и вымысла. Жилистый пахан рассказывал о кражах и побегах из мест заключения [...] Воры восторженно подхохатывали после каждой его истории.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 285.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

this rule are for workers, the poor, and the middle class, and even in these cases a prisoner must first be included only on a trial basis.²⁶⁹

This set of conditions demonstrates how much class and social status—as well as the crime committed—determined organizational membership. While the petty criminals were certainly the most privileged of all groups at the Canal, this population was actually the most ill-equipped to hold such responsibilities—leading to mass disorganization, abuse of power, and a re-configuration of the social environment along the lines of criminal mores. The criminals in the short story “The Moan of Stones” transformed the barracks into a veritable den of filth and vice, where people were continuously playing cards, swilling vodka, and engaging in drunken orgies. The unbelievable racket in the living quarters robs Donskoi of the only peace he has—his dreams—and so his situation becomes more and more unbearable.²⁷⁰ Donskoi has a base opinion of this criminal populace; he likens them to stupid animals, unable to see anything worthwhile in their characters: “With disgust [Donskoi] thought about how little in them was human, and the very worst was that these unfortunates were doomed to a slow death since in reality no one was interested in their fate.”²⁷¹ This phrase, underlined in wax pencil, clearly caught the attention of the editorial board, and it also demonstrates that political and criminal prisoners inevitably had interactions with one another, even if it was at times undesirable.

Perhaps the most damning aspect of Kitchner’s short story “The Moan of Stones” is neither the portrayed disorganization at the camp site nor even the deflation of the entire system of shock-workers and cultural educators; rather, it is Donskoi’s blame of the prisoners

²⁶⁹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 47, l. 101.

²⁷⁰ See earlier commentary on page 84 on the importance of dreams and sleep in prison.

²⁷¹ «С отвращением думал о том, что как мало было в них человеческого, и что самое страшное, эти несчастные были обречены на медленную гибель, так-как и к ней участью, и к ним воспитатель в сущности никто не интересовался.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 99.

themselves in the apparatus of power. These prisoners, who refuse to disobey orders and silently work as requested, are the real source of shame: “Donskoi raised his voice. ‘We ourselves, ourselves are guilty.’ Donskoi ardently began speaking, ‘we are many, almost everyone is unhappy, and everyone is quiet [...] they talk to us like cattle, and we work [...] you really think someone will free us? No! It is only our own hands that can bring us to freedom.’”²⁷² When his interlocutor claims that overtired workers do not have the strength to stage a rebellion, Donskoi merely insists that the time is not far off when the entire country will stand up for itself and issue a verdict on the injustices done to them. Donskoi is finally ordered to collect his things and is confronted about his anti-Soviet agitation among the prisoners, but he is bold and direct with the administration. His response also merits wax pencil underlining by the editors: “You are the executioner and I am the victim, but remember well that roles often change.”²⁷³

Kitchner’s story ends cryptically. At first, the narrator uses onomatopoeia to liken the noises on the Canal (“buk, buk, bu-yk”) similar to an earlier-discussed submission) to resounding explosions, each causing pain in Donskoi’s heart. As the title suggests, Donskoi feels as if the rocks themselves are groaning and engulfing him in their cries, and the entire world is filled with pain and despair of these desperate noises. Auditory motifs again play an important stylistic role. Yet suddenly, a different image appears to him: the columns of convoys and their fiery words about moving forward towards a common goal. Now Donskoi feels as if he is filled with colossal strength, the strength of a certain and future victory. He straightens up and looks up to the sun, pressing his hands together.

²⁷² «Донской повысил голос. «Мы же сами, сами виноваты.» Пламенно заговорил Донской, «нас много, весь народ почти недоволен, а все молчат [...] с нами обращаются как с скотом, а мы работаем. Что-же вы думаете, мессия какой-нибудь освободит вас. Нет! Нами собственные руки могут принести нам свободу.» Ibid, l. 100.

²⁷³ «Вы палач, а я жертва, но запомните хорошенько, роли часто меняются.» Ibid.

This very provocative story raises many important and controversial issues regarding the construction of the Belomorkanal: the privileging of criminal prisoners over their political counterparts, the general mayhem and disorder in the barracks, and, most importantly, the guilt of the general populace for what was occurring both at the campsite and in the Soviet Union as a whole. Even though Kitchner emphasizes the misery of day-to-day life on the Canal, his fictional narrative based on real events also, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrates how easily prisoners could become engulfed in the power apparatus at work on the project. During a noisy card game in the barracks, one prisoner brags about his belief in the Soviet system, as if making this proclamation will assure him some sort of status, “One of ‘their own’ was already loudly, drunkenly crying out, ‘I am for socialist competition, I am an *udarnik*, and do not dare touch me.”²⁷⁴ This quasi caste-based system of shock-workers is re-addressed when Donskoi discusses the potential for early release with an old peasant acquaintance of his. While his friend Pankratov maintains that there will be an early release for all those who work hard, Donskoi contends that only the thieves—and not those sentenced under article 58—will receive such privileges. In the face of such injustice, Donskoi insists that the only way to spur any amelioration of their situation is to stop working. Yet, of course, this is precisely what the administration cannot accept, even if they can be permissive in other areas. In fact, Kitchner’s story demonstrates how the authorities were prepared to be relaxed about everyday behaviors in exchange for work, with one official promising Donskoi he can stay up late and play cards and drink if only he will help work on the construction.²⁷⁵ As an intellectual, however, Donskoi would have found these propositions appealing.

²⁷⁴ «Один из «своих» уже сильно опьяненный выкрикивал: «Я за соц. соревнование, я ударник, и не смеите меня трогать.» Ibid, l. 99.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, l. 100.

The overt criticism of the White Sea-Baltic Canal project and the Soviet Union in Kitchner's story is brazen, daring, and brave. It is difficult to imagine a prisoner having the panache and wherewithal to contest the regime so openly within the context of a prison setting. Furthermore, the contribution was signed, not anonymous, and there is no evidence to suggest the use of an assumed name. In addition, the editors did not seem to react very strongly to the short story; although they underlined the seemingly more offensive excerpts in pencil, there is no written commentary, as there is with the pieces the editors judged as artistically inferior. Although it would be impossible to deduce just from this evidence the precise power dynamics at the Canal's construction site, it certainly gives some probable indications, suggesting that the administration's control over the prisoners as well as the ideological atmosphere was less than ideal. Notations in Alymov's notebooks make evident a high degree of disorganization, "Where is the plan? We know nothing. We know that it is necessary to build a canal. But how, what—no one knows anything—and the plan is not clear to anyone."²⁷⁶ Finally, although Kitchner's work was submitted to *Perekovka* as a work of fiction, it is clearly rooted in the reality of daily life at the Canal. This is not surprising, given the competition's instructions to focus submissions on the various real-life "battles" fought at the Canal.

Although certain thematic motifs remain more or less constant in works published and culled by the newspaper *Perekovka*, an analysis of these texts allows for at least a complication, if not a violation, of our expectations for a Gulag newspaper. *Perekovka* champions as well as scolds the prisoners' work efforts; the editors often seem more concerned with the literary merit of submissions than with their ideological correctness; the pieces chosen to win prizes do not necessarily portray the project entirely positively; the reaction to overtly critical pieces submitted

²⁷⁶ «Где план? Мы ничего не знаем. Знаем, что канал надо строить. А как, что – никто не знает...а план никому не известен.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 5, d. 22, l. 16.

to the literary competitions seems lukewarm. These inconsistencies demonstrate an odd state of affairs: what seems like a straightforward propagandistic organ of state ideals actually contains much more complicated messages.

2.2 PART II: PERFORMANCE

2.2.1 Introduction: Plays as Proletarian Art Form in the Soviet Union

At the October 1932 meeting of Soviet writers at Maksim Gor'kii's house, Stalin spoke about the importance of theater in creating a new proletarian culture: "What is there to write? Poetry is good. Novels are even better. But right now we need plays more than anything else. Plays that are easy to understand; our working man is busy."²⁷⁷ It is understandable why Stalin would choose theater before all other art forms as particularly adept in creating cultural consciousness for the working man. Staging a theater performance necessitates collaborative work, similar to the then-popular forms of brigade painting and collective writing in which the group is privileged over the individual.²⁷⁸ After all, the *History of the Construction*, the foundational text of the Canal's construction, is a manifestation of this communal trend in creative projects.²⁷⁹ The quality of accessibility is of utmost importance in creating a new, proletarian culture, since the

²⁷⁷ «О чем писать? Стихи хорошие. Романы еще лучше. Но пьесы нам сейчас нужнее всего. Пьеса доходчивей, наш рабочий занят.» RGALI, f. 1604, op. 1, d. 21, l. 30.

²⁷⁸ For a further explication of brigade art, see Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1991): 182-85, 198-99.

²⁷⁹ Art, often an entirely individual, and potentially bourgeois, endeavor is meant to become a cooperative effort in the Soviet Union. Plays, like films (another one of Stalin's favorite art forms, evident by his installation of a personal screening room at his dacha in Sochi), also have the advantage of being comprehensible to those who are illiterate. This most likely prompts Stalin's further commentary on the subject at the October meeting that "plays are right now the most popularly accessible type of art in literature." (А пьесы – это сейчас самый массовый вид искусства в литературе). RGALI, f. 1604, op. 1, d. 21, l. 31).

massive peasant population in the process of shifting to urban centers is ideologically unenlightened and mostly illiterate.

The regional Karelian newspaper *Karelo-Murmanskii krai* confirms the integral role of performance at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, noting that of all the artistic endeavors at the construction site, the agitational brigades were the most popular and important.²⁸⁰ In his memoirs, Vatslav Dvorzhetskii cited the theater as the administration's most noteworthy endeavor.²⁸¹ Theatrical performance—especially the ultra-Soviet agitational variety—was highly influential not only at the White Sea-Baltic Canal but also in the country at large during the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸² In a prison setting, theater often has a calming, restorative function, because the act of adopting a new name and pretending to be someone else allowed prisoners to escape their own realities for a brief respite.²⁸³ Even the act of *perekovka* can be interpreted along these lines; convicts who did submit to the process of re-forging exchanged their criminal nicknames for their given names, embracing a new identity and a supposedly new way of life. Also like a theater performance, however, criminals could act out this supposed transformation as if it were reality so as to procure material advantages. Theatrics, therefore, occurred in many

²⁸⁰ *Karelo-Murmanskii krai* 5-6 (20 July 1933): 30.

²⁸¹ Dvorzhetskii, 84.

²⁸² Agitational theater was even exported to capitalist countries in an effort to spread Soviet propaganda; in May 1933 the International Olympiad of Revolutionary Theaters organized its first and only convention of agitprop theater in Moscow at which capitalist-country participants could learn about the latest techniques in use in Russia. See Lynn Mally, "Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater," *Slavic Review* 2 (2003): 324-42.

²⁸³ The predominance of theater is especially apparent in the context of the Holocaust, where prisoners remember their theatrical productions as a singular moment of happiness in a world of pain. Gerda Wiessmann Klein remembers the skits she performed in Nazi concentration camps as a source of genuine joy in an otherwise horrific environment: "I was urged to arrange more performances for Sundays. I spent many a night writing in the washroom. I loved every bit of it. I loved the applause in my ears. I loved the single light burning on our improvised stage when the rest of the room was in darkness. I loved that light falling upon me and illuminating my figure. I loved to hear my voice in the hushed silence. But best of all I loved those upturned faces between the bunks, the smiles and sudden laughter, the knowledge that it was in my power to bring them an hour of fun, to help them forget." *All But My Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 141.

contexts and were an essential component of the cultural *byt* (everyday life) at the Belomorkanal and subjectivity ultimately becomes linked to performance.

In this section, two key figures in the area of performance will be discussed: Igor' Terent'ev and Vatslav Dvorzhetskii. The two complement each other productively, as each artist had quite different experiences among opposing prisoner groups—Terent'ev worked mainly with criminal prisoners in his formation of agitational brigades, whereas Dvorzhetskii worked exclusively with political prisoners in his experience at the camp's local theater. Each had particular working environments, projects, and attitudes about the Canal, and the two also met quite different fates. Since Terent'ev and Dvorzhetskii were both members of the intelligentsia, a separate section on the criminal aspects of performance will also be included in this category.

2.2.2 Igor' Terent'ev: Agitational Brigade Leader

At the camp site, the criminal population had the opportunity to transform the theatrics of thieving into literal performance by participating in *agitbrigady*, theater troupes and musical ensembles. One of the most visible personalities in the arena of performance was Igor' Terent'ev, who before his incarceration was a member of the futurist group 41° and active in the creation of youth theater ensembles in Ukraine. The group 41°, whose members included Aleksei Kruchenykh and Ilya and Kirill Zdanevich, held eccentric performances at the Tiflis nightclub The Fantastic Tavern (*Fantasticheskii Kabachok*) and proclaimed *zaum'* (“transrational language” or “beyondsense”) as the cornerstone of aesthetic inspiration. One of the goals of the

group 41° was to “to put the world on a new axis,” a task that sounds remarkably similar to the one undertaken at the White Sea-Baltic Canal.²⁸⁴

As one of the most avant-garde of all the futurist groups, 41° members sought radically to transform the world and the language used to express it. They even looked upon such “classic” futurists as Vladimir Maiakovskii and Velimir Khlebnikov as obsolete figures.²⁸⁵ Terent'ev's extreme radicalism made him “primarily an apostle of the absurd and an apologist for aggressive mediocrity.”²⁸⁶ Yet *zaum'*, the aesthetic and philosophical backbone of Terent'ev's version of Russian futurism, was not intended as a mere synonym for gibberish or nonsense. Instead, *zaum'* proposed a new understanding of language appreciative of the sounds of speech and words in of themselves. This feature rendered Russian futurism distinct from its Italian counterpart, while testing the boundaries of language itself.²⁸⁷ *Zaum'*'s stress on the auditory component of language recalls the poetry and short stories of White Sea-Baltic Canal prisoners, which often highlight the aural atmosphere of the work site and the “symphony of labor” that it produces.

In the “Declaration of Transrational Language” (1921),²⁸⁸ the importance of sound is underscored and eventually linked to image, since *zaum'* often begins with “a rhythmic, musical agitation, a “protosound” that may eventually “give birth to a transrational protoimage.”²⁸⁹ While sound remains the most important element of this aesthetic philosophy, it is deeply connected to the visual. Paralleling this trend, Terent'ev's theater performances at the Shuvalov palace in St. Petersburg used surrealistic paintings complete with visible organs, veins, and

²⁸⁴ Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2006), 338.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 339.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 358.

²⁸⁷ Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego UP, 1996), 1, 3.

²⁸⁸ Lawton and Eagle, 182-83.

²⁸⁹ Markov, 345.

arteries in the theater's foyer as a "kind of visual prelude to Terentiev's [sic] productions."²⁹⁰ Exhibiting merry, crude, and brutally naturalistic qualities, Terent'ev's performances were veritable romps in which sound effects, multiple languages and scandalous behaviors all contributed to his notoriety as a particularly daring and obscene director.²⁹¹

Sergei Alymov (the central personality in the first section of this chapter) also had connections to the futurist movement. As an ego-futurist, Alymov wrote the collection of poetry *Kiosk of Tenderness* (*Kiosk nezhnosti*, 1920) and helped to organize the journal *Creation* (*Tvorchestvo*) with fellow futurists in Vladivostok.²⁹² It is telling that two of the most important cultural personas at the White Sea-Baltic Canal hailed from a futurist background, and it should be noted that some of the prisoner poetry has a choppy, avant-garde style similar to Terent'ev's. Aleksei Kruchenykh, a fellow 41° member along with Terent'ev, identified the following characteristics dominant in their variety of futurism: "richness of sonic orchestration, gaudy metaphorism, variety of rhythmic patterns, and structure based on shift."²⁹³ In this respect, the core dilemmas at the foundation of futurism and the construction of the Canal were quite similar: the re-making of a new world and a new language to accompany it, the privileging of the culture of the streets as well as everyday life, and a spotlight on the criminal realm.²⁹⁴

From April 1931 until the completion of the Canal, Terent'ev headed an agitational brigade named after camp official Semen Firin (*agitbrigada im. Firina*), a name the prisoners themselves suggested, since Firin took a particular interest in learning about individual

²⁹⁰ Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 201.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 202-3.

²⁹² Markov, 318.

²⁹³ Ibid, 348.

²⁹⁴ The futurists adapted the symbolist notion of art as the creation of life (*tvorchestvo zhizni*) to the idea of life-building (*zhiznestroenie*), infusing technical connotations into an aesthetic, utopian vision of the world and the "new man" who will inhabit it. For more on the topic of *zhiznestroenie*, see Chapter One and also Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, eds., *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).

criminals' lives at the camp site.²⁹⁵ Terent'ev also coordinated the exceedingly popular Povenets agitational brigade (*Povenetskaia agitbrigada*), named for a town near the camp site. A journalist visiting the White Sea-Baltic Canal in 1933 describes the excitement of watching a Terent'ev performance:

The numbers follow one after another and the artists come out one after another. Such richness and different genres! From the lyrical scene of *Shalman* to lively ditties and mad dance. [...] People who are re-forged through labor look upon their past with pain. And here is Lelia Furaeva, in the past a thief and recidivist, and now she is freed early, one of the best shock-workers, singing songs, the thieves' song of *Shalman*, a hopeless and despairing song, and there was a coldness in the air from the stage. And it is Lelia Furaeva with her comrades who led the scene in the club to such an ascent [...] that the room roared with applause, and invisible threads of sympathy, love and admiration tied together the stage and the spectators.²⁹⁶

The troupe's numbers were equally popular among the prisoners, who had their favorite performers among the criminal participants: the former thieves Iurii Sobolev, Vladimir Kuznetsov and Mikhail Savel'ev as well as the former prostitutes Lelia Furaeva (in the description above) and Marina Bannikova.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 331.

²⁹⁶ «Номера следуют один за другим, артисты сменяют друг друга. Какое богатство и разнообразие жанров! От лирической сцены *Шалмана* до задорных частушек и бешеной пляски [...] Люди, перековавшие себя в труде, с болью оглядываются на свое прошлое. И вот тут Леля Фураева, в прошлом воровка-рецидивистка, а сейчас досрочно освобожденная, лучшая ударница, спела песенку, простую блатную песню шалмана, песню безнадёжности и отчаяния, и холодом повеяло со сцены. И эта же Леля Фураева со своими товарищами провела сцену в клубе с таким подъёмом [...] что зал грохнул аплодисментами, и невидимые нити симпатии, любви и восхищения связали сцену и зрителей.» Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, fn 17, p. 547.

²⁹⁷ Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, fn 1, p. 501.

Terent'ev's daughter Tat'iana Terent'eva recalls her father's performances as "funny and sharp vaudeville on the theme of prison life," and she claims that it was only thanks to their production that prisoners began to over-fulfill their norms.²⁹⁸ Despite the repression of her father, Terent'eva chooses to acknowledge his achievements in terms of Soviet standards—dedication to work and fulfillment of the norm. She seems proud not only of her father's ability to inspire others to work but also of his personal efforts and records, demonstrating that such accomplishments can still serve as a source of satisfaction for family members, despite the tragic fates of their relatives at Soviet hands.

Terent'ev, therefore, was achieving precisely the art-labor synchronicity that Gulag officials so encouraged. Not only was he a highly successful agitational brigade leader, but he also regularly fulfilled 400% of the work norm, wrote for the camp newspaper, and organized concerts. The administration immediately noticed his dedication and value to the cultural arena at BelBaltLag, and they rewarded him with separate living quarters.²⁹⁹ Given his success, Terent'ev and his actors were freed early from prison, and the futurist eventually moved to Moscow, where he voluntarily participated in the creation of agitational brigades at the Moscow-Volga Canal.

In yet another example of the absurdity³⁰⁰ that permeates Belomorstroi narratives, Terent'ev was arrested in Moscow because of supposed anti-Soviet themes in his theater productions, when the theater director had in fact been producing some of the most pro-Soviet theatrical productions—agitational brigades—at BelBaltLag. Terent'ev had continued his work

²⁹⁸ «Терентьев писал смешные острые водевили – на темы лагерной жизни. И отлично их ставил. Заключенные так любили эти выступления, что только ради них план начинали перевыполнять.» Tat'iana Terent'eva, "Moi otets Igor' Terent'ev," *Zaumnyi futurizm i dadizm v russkoi kul'ture*, eds. Luigi Magarotto, Marco Marciaduri and Daniela Rizzi (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), 358.

²⁹⁹ Terent'eva, 358.

³⁰⁰ The importance of the absurd as motif of the Canal project will be addressed more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

in agitational theater in Dmitlag (the camp of the Moscow-Volga Canal) as a free citizen, choosing to live at a Gulag camp site to facilitate his work. Ironically, the namesake of one of his most popular brigades and seemingly untouchable Gulag official Semen Firin eventually suffered the same fate as his protégé; after the downfall of Genrikh Iagoda, Firin was arrested and killed in 1938. Despite this tragic end for Terent'ev as well as for the official who had served as his protector, the futurist's daughter was able to remark upon the unusual atmosphere at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, "The camp at BBK remains in one's memory, I would say, as some sort of democracy," where the Kulaks lived better than they did in exile.³⁰¹ This comparison, although seemingly controversial, merits elaboration. Although many people assume the Gulag to be the nexus of Stalinist evil where all of communism's horrific machinations are concentrated—at times likened with Nazi concentration camps—the reality is that exile, collectivization, and forced famines were often much more brutal and certainly more deadly.³⁰²

Terent'ev's dedication and talent was ultimately not appreciated by the regime. In May 1937, the innovative performer was arrested without the right to correspondence—a virtual death sentence. Although his official death certificate states that he died of a heart attack in March 1946, Terent'ev was actually shot on 17 June 1937 in the infamous Butyrka prison in Moscow.³⁰³ It is through this personal story that just one of the many Belomorkanal tragedies comes to light: the unapologetic assassination of a brilliant mind who in fact greatly—and enthusiastically—contributed to Soviet ideals and cultural life at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. By applying his

³⁰¹ «Лагерь на ВВК запомнился каким-то, я бы сказала, демократичным», Terent'eva, 358.

³⁰² For a further treatment of this discussion (the emphasis on Nazi and Gulag concentration camps rather than the much more deadly phenomena of mobile killing squads and forced famine and collectivization), see: Timothy Snyder, "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality," *New York Times Review of Books* 12 (16 July 2009): 14-16.

³⁰³ Igor' Terent'ev, *Moi pokhorony* (Moscow: Gileia, 1993), 51, 60.

artistic skills to novel, experimental projects, Terent'ev was able to ease the pain of prison. As his daughter Terent'eva recalled, living was always interesting to him, “even in prison, even in camp,” and “he survived [through prison] thanks to his talent, intelligence, character. Later he told us about how he started drawing portraits of prisoners so as to not fall into grief.”³⁰⁴ Art often played an important role in facilitating survival for both criminal and political prisoners.

In addition to Terent'ev's integral role as agitational brigade producer, the performances themselves must be examined for their contribution to the cultural life at the Belomorkanal. These productions were a type of assemblage—a three-dimensional collage of humans, music, backdrops, and props. Terent'ev's Povenets brigade included mandolins, two accordions, and two guitars. Terent'ev either wrote the words for the songs himself or used verses from Soviet poets. His lines, often similar to *chastushki*, were short and rhymed, making them easy to memorize and repeat, and so adeptly served a propagandistic purpose. Like a mobile art brigade, the troupes would perform everywhere: at the barracks, in the cafeteria, on the work site. Actors who participated in these performances were not freed from their work duties, and they somehow found the energy to perform after a long day of hard physical labor.³⁰⁵

The aesthetic of the agitational brigades is related to a theatrical aesthetic Terent'ev espoused called “lito-montazh.” This term refers to the organic combination of heterogeneous texts, through which an entirely new work is created.³⁰⁶ Although Terent'ev uses the word in regard to theater, it could also have a more general, literary application. Even the camp newspaper *Perekovka* recognizes this new, innovative genre of “lito-montazh,” awarding such a piece, written by David Iansen, a 75-ruble prize. The text, entitled, “How They Build a

³⁰⁴ «Даже в тюрьме, даже в лагере», «Выжил благодаря своему таланту, уму, характеру. Потом он нам рассказывал, как стал, чтобы не пропасть от тоски, рисовать портреты заключенных», Ibid, 357.

³⁰⁵ Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 72.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, fn 489.

Waterway” (*Kak stroiat vodnyi put'*), is described by the author as a “literary-theatrical montage” (*literaturno-stsenicheskii montazh*) that attempts to “write a theatrical work on contemporary-production themes with a range of the most important moments of the construction, cultural work, and everyday life of the canal army workers.”³⁰⁷ The piece seems more like a musical composition than a theatrical submission, with a chorus of eight different parts and a separate “oratory” (*oratoriia*).³⁰⁸ Iansen addresses the question of construction throughout his work, and the physical building of the Canal is the most significant theme in the text. Just as the prisoners are building the Canal, step by step and piece by piece, so does this work build itself out of a multitude of voices, employing an auditory format. Iansen’s work contains many of the characteristics in Kruchenykh’s definition of futurism: sonic orchestration, rhythmical patterns, shift of tone, and, one could argue, gaudy metaphorism.

Terent'ev notes his interest in lito-montazh as early as 1925 in the theater journal *The Worker and the Theater* (*Rabochii i teatr*). According to Terent'ev, the term montage³⁰⁹ is not only important in “lito-montazh,” but rather will help to change the world entirely:

We don’t need—composition!

Not music—but sound montage!

Not decoration—but assembly!

Not painting—but light montage!

Not plays—but literary montage!³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ «Написать сценическое произведение на актуально-производственные темы с охватом наиболее важных момент строительства, культаботы, и быта каналоармейцев.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 35.

³⁰⁸ This piece echoes the structure of the contemporary poet Sergei Stratanovskii’s work, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

³⁰⁹ Interestingly the word “montage” (*montazh*) in Russian refers to both the literary device as well as the assembly of machinery or editing of a film or literary work.

³¹⁰ «Нам не нужно – сочинительства! / Не музыка – а звукмонтаж! / Не декорация – а монтировка! / Не живопись – а светмонтаж! / Не пьеса – а литомонтаж!» Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 299.

The construction of Stalin's White Sea Canal, therefore, offers a thematic opportunity in which art products that appear built or assembled in terms of their structure could also literally be on the topic of construction and mechanics, as is the case with Iansen's submission to *Perekovka*.

Terent'ev believed that it was through these separate bits and pieces that the whole of proletarian culture could best be expressed, and the mediums of this newly-created proletarian world are framed in organic terms, "the living book instead of the play! The living book is: literary montage plus sound plus bio-montage (that is to say the actor)."³¹¹ Art, therefore, was expected to reflect the active realities of life itself. This was especially true at Belomorstoi, where the prisoners were encouraged to base their compositions solely on the *quotidien*. This focus inevitably imbued artistic texts from the Canal with the physicality of hard labor, demonstrating how creativity and work were inseparable at the camp site. The Povenets agitational brigade had as their motto an inspirational speech full of words related to the body:

Guys, tell us,
Where, in what brigade
Are you trudging along from behind?
We will go there and we will help!
Not only in word but in deed,
Not only in soul,
But in body,
Not only with Russian folk songs,
But with muscles,
Not only with a singing round dance,

³¹¹ «Живая книга вместо пьесы! Живая книга – это: литомонтаж + звук + биомонтаж (т.е. актер!),» Ibid.

But with actual sweat,
Not only with art and culture,
But with cubic capacity...³¹²

Terent'ev defines this slogan as the Povenets brigade's source of success, words the brigade leader claims spring naturally from, and bring them back to, their labor efforts.³¹³ The motto makes it clear that the members of the brigade are not only prepared to perform for their fellow prisoners, but also to put down their instruments and work alongside them; once again, art and labor are inextricably connected, and participation in performance brigades did not excuse prisoners from general work as it did in other Gulag camps.

There is often a raw physicality—bordering on violence—in the rhetoric of the texts under discussion here, and these works are in turn supposed to inspire and to train the body. The camp newspaper *Perevovka*, in an article about the success of agitational brigades, records several instances in which workers who previously could not fulfill the work plan suddenly begin over-fulfilling the norms after a troupe's performance. The entertainment potential of these shows, while still extant, is always supposed to come second to their motivational goals. Yet the Canal administration, realizing that the best way to teach people to work is to lead by example, encouraged the agitational brigades to conduct physical labor while performing. This participation, according to *Perekovka*, supposedly fills the other Canal workers with a new-found enthusiasm during the last days of the Canal's construction.³¹⁴

³¹² «Ребята, скажите, / Где, в какой бригаде / Плетутся сзади? / Мы пойдем и поможем! / Не только словом, но и делом, / Не только душой, / Но и телом, / Не только песнями народными русскими / Но и мускулами, / Не толжко хороводом, / Но и собственным потом, / Не только художеством и культурой, / Но и кубатурой...» Terent'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 332.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ *Perekovka* 101 (7 November 1932): 17.

2.2.3 Theater Director: Vatslav Dvorzhetskii

The theater director Vatslav Dvorzhetskii, sentenced to ten years in prison as an enemy of the state under article 58, credited art to his survival; his “actor’s nature” (*akterskaia priroda*) helped him in the all-important task of remaining a person in a concentration camp; in short, “art helped one to survive.”³¹⁵ It is also possible to understand the “actor’s nature” in relationship to the performance of subjectivity; perhaps Dvorzhetskii is also implying that his ability to act parts and play roles assured his survival. Sent to Solovki, Vaigach Island and Moscow, Dvorzhetskii finally arrived at the White Sea-Baltic Canal in 1933. His first impression of the city of Medvezh'egorsk is one of excitement about the local theater and its professionalism:

A real, big, comfortable theater! A wonderfully equipped stage, auditorium, lobby, backstage help—everything! And a real, large, professional company: a manager, head director, administrators, directors, actors, singers, ballet dancers, musicians, artists—and all are prisoners. And the audience is also all prisoners. It’s true, though, that the first two rows are separated for free people and two side boxes are for the administrators.³¹⁶

In addition to the spaces reserved for non-prisoners and the administration, there were frequent guests in the theater, including journalists, representatives of various commissions, and even sometimes foreigners.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ «Искусство помогло выжить,» Vatslav Dvorzhetskii, *Puti bol'shikh etapov* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1994), 7.

³¹⁶ «Настоящий, большой, удобный театр! Великолепно оборудована сцена, зал, фойе, закулисные службы – все! И труппа настоящая, большая, профессиональная директор, главный режиссер, администраторы, режиссеры, актеры, певцы, артисты балета, музыканты, художники – все заключенные. И зрители все – заключенные. Правда, два первых ряда отгорожены – для вольнонаемных и две ложи боковые – для начальства.» Dvorzhetskii, 78.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 84.

The theater in Medvezh'egorsk was indeed a life-saver for Dvorzhetskii, especially since the productions were of high quality and the audience was both hungry for art and incredibly diverse—hailing from all Soviet republics, representing all ages, and having committed various crimes.³¹⁸ The actors in the main theater lived in their own barracks, with women and men divided. Although Dvorzhetskii recalled life as strict—any infraction of the regime would land prisoners in a punishment cell or in the general workforce and all communication with non-prisoners was strictly forbidden—it also seemed relatively relaxed; there were no fences or barbed wire, and the security paid little attention to the fulfillment of the administration's demands, according to Dvorzhetskii. Most importantly, since Dvorzhetskii lived in the actors' barracks with other performers and *Perekovka* workers, he had the privilege of meeting many other interesting intellectuals, including literary critics, philosophers, and scholars.³¹⁹

Dvorzhetskii's memoirs about the Belomorkanal theater provide an unusual glance into the daily life of prisoners and the administration, since he gives a summary of the overall power structure in play: the theater director was the prisoners' sole link to the administration, and he had the ability to alter the convicts' lives in dramatic ways. The actor-prisoners, all sentenced under article 58, did not talk about their punishment or crime, since the various *punkty* of the article did not much make difference. Only the criminal prisoners could be released early, and Dvorzhetskii recalls the camp official Rappoport announcing the freeing of *udarniki* and the strong impression it had on the other prisoners, whether or not they could verify if such discharges actually happened. Even though the actors did not have the possibility of early release, they did have other advantages: with permission from the administration, they could stay in the hotel opposite the theater for a day, week, or even month; they could travel as far as Kem'

³¹⁸ Ibid, 83.

³¹⁹ Dvorzhetskii, 79.

to give performances at various worksites, and they could make voyages to perform without the accompaniment of guards. While many of the prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal note the relative ease of movement, ubiquitous disorganization, and lack of strict patrolling, this set of circumstances did not necessarily make it easier to escape. As Dvorzhetskii notes, the train tracks themselves were strictly guarded, and a prisoner—with his or her gray, skinny frame—would easily be recognized from afar. Besides these difficulties, there was really nowhere to run, given the remote location of the construction project. Finally, it was mainly criminals who ever dared such an escape, since they would merely be caught, beaten, and returned, whereas those caught escaping under article 58 would be shot.³²⁰

Unlike Terent'ev, Dvorzhetskii worked exclusively with other political prisoners, rendering his prison experience differently from the agitational brigade leader's. Dvorzhetskii, also unlike Terent'ev, managed to survive the Stalinist regime, dying of natural causes in Nizhnii Novgorod in 1993. Yet both artists relied on creative expression in order to survive the prison experience; Terent'ev with mobile performance groups and Dvorzhetskii with the comfort of a professional-style theater.

2.2.4 *Prestupniki* as Performers: The Criminal World and the Cultural Revolution

Performance occurred at BelBaltLag in a literal way, with theater productions, agitational brigades, and musical accompaniment as regular occurrences, but it is also possible to interpret performance at the White Sea-Baltic Canal metaphorically. This is especially true with regard

³²⁰ Dvorzhetskii, 81-82.

to the criminal realm. The criminal prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal often took great pride in their former professions in the underworld, and prisoner autobiographies stress the amount of finesse and care necessary to carry out a successful crime. The criminal act, in turn, became like a performance, an art form that one must struggle to master and for which some had more natural talent than others. Thieves' slang sometimes captured this artful essence in its terminology: *risovat'*, or to draw, means to kill and a *pero*, or quill pen, is a knife.³²¹ In the play *Aristocrats* (*Aristokraty*, 1934) to be discussed in Chapter Three, a character called simply "tattooed woman" (*tatuirovannaia*) teaches other prisoners about the "art" of killing. In pre-war Odessa, one of the bastions of the criminal underworld, thieves would perform their acts with stunning flair, acquiring notoriety and fame for their elegant maneuvers. A reporter at the time likened such criminals to "artistes" and "ballet dancers."³²² Many of the prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal likely came from Odessa, and this magnetic city served as the inspiration for some of the cultural works to be discussed here; perhaps no other place in Eastern Europe is as synonymous with crime as Odessa, the "city of thieves."³²³

Odessa played a major part in a criminal song about the White Sea-Baltic Canal from the early 1930s, "Music Is Playing in the Moldavanka" (*Na Moldavanke muzyka igraet*). The neighborhood Moldavanka was a type of city-within-a-city, infamous for its "dark alleys, filthy streets, crumbling buildings, and violence."³²⁴ It was also a distinctly Jewish neighborhood in which middle-class business affairs took place alongside more seedy activities.³²⁵ Although

³²¹ For these and other criminal slang definitions, see Dantsik Baldaev et al, eds, *Slovar' tiuremno-lagero-blatnogo zhargona* (Moscow: Kraia Moskv, 1992).

³²² Qtd., Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales from Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2005), 56.

³²³ Odessa, importantly, is also known for its long association with satire and comic literature.

³²⁴ Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales from Old Odessa*, 48.

³²⁵ Ibid.

there are several versions of the song,³²⁶ the same basic story remains the same: the pickpocket Kol'ka is sent to the Belomorkanal as a prisoner from his native Odessa, and the local *pakhan* (crime boss) decides to send the beautiful Masha after him to facilitate his escape from the labor camp. What she finds, however, is unexpected; Kol'ka has been “re-forged” into a hard-working citizen, and does not want to return to Odessa nor to his former criminal life:

Ah, hello Masha, my dear darling,
Say hello to Odessa and its rose gardens.
Tell the thieves that Kol'ka is developing
Into a hero of the canal in the flames of work!
Also tell them, that he doesn't steal anymore,
He has ended his criminal life forever,
He has understood a new and different life here,
Which the Belomorkanal gave him.
Goodbye, Masha, my dear darling,
Say hello to Mother Odessa.³²⁷

It is significant that Kol'ka refers to himself in the third person; like the engineer Magnitov in the *History of the Construction*, he has become a new person and so can speak about himself from a distance, objectively. His transformation matches the idealized rehabilitation of *perekovka*—through the physical strain of hard labor, he has found a new code of morals and given up his old life. Yet the criminal code of behavior is just as strict as the Soviet penal

³²⁶ In a second version, Masha threatens to turn all of the criminals into the police for wanting to kill Ios'ka because she too has learned to swear allegiance to the Belomorkanal, a change of heart which leads to her being murdered by the gang first. See Robert A. Rothstein, “How It Was Sung in Odessa: At the Intersection of Russian and Yiddish Folk Culture,” *Slavic Review* 4 (Winter 2002): 781-801, 794.

³²⁷ Maikl and Lidiia Dzhelokobson, *Pesennyi folk'lor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik 1917-39* (Moscow: Sovremennyyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 1998), 335-38.

system; since Kol'ka has broken the trust of his gang, the *pakhan* orders him murdered immediately. It is crucial to highlight that even a representative text from the thieves' world includes a re-forging narrative, thereby echoing the official ideology of the Canal project and demonstrating the tenacity of its ideals in criminal prisoner realms.

The song also highlights important elements of the criminal world: thieves' jargon, like the words *pakhan* and *fraer* (the slang terms for a crime boss and a non-criminal, respectively); the criminal profession of pickpocket; and the sinister realm of Odessa, its dark and mysterious dens coupled with the tender nickname of "mother." Given the important status of the maternal figure in criminal culture, this frequent nickname for Odessa demonstrates how much the thieves adored their unique and colorful city.³²⁸ Like the Moldovanka neighborhood, Odessa in general was a conspicuously Jewish city, and many of its gangsters and crime lords were Jews.³²⁹ Interestingly, the Belomorkanal construction had a similarly Jewish flavor, with some scholars noting that all the top administration posts were occupied by Jews³³⁰ and others acknowledging the significant Jewish elements in the *History of the Construction*.³³¹ A criminal tattoo from Gulag represents graphically—with anti-Semitic connotations—the association between Jewish power and the prison camps. Across the forehead of a devilish-looking character is written "Ruler of the Gulag" (*Khoziain Gulaga*), while next to him are written the names of various

³²⁸ Varlaam Shalamov, in his essays on the criminal world, notes how the mother is the most important person in a criminal's life and supersedes all loyalty to other family members, including wives and children.

³²⁹ The Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky offers an interesting description of the specifically Jewish thieving culture in Odessa, his native city: "The Jewish characterization of my fellow residents was an insult: 'A thieving city.' But this must be understood philosophically [...] The word 'thief' in Yiddish ('*ganev*') has a much deeper meaning. It characterized a person who could fool you before you could fool him – in short, experienced, shrewd, a trickster, a manipulator, a maneuverer, a man of ingenuity, a screamer, an exaggerator, a speculator—but I said 'in short.'"³³⁰ *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*, Ed. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996, 397-98. For fictional representations of Jewish criminal life in Odessa, see Isaak Babel's short story collection *Odessa Tales* (*Odesskie rasskazy*, 1931), in particular "How It Was Done in Odessa," which highlights the gangster character Benya Krik.

³³⁰ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 199.

³³¹ Alice Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity: Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992), 21.

labor camps, including the Belomorkanal. There can be no doubt about the anti-Jewish illusions: the beastly character has a hooked nose and horns, a pointed beard and bulging eyes, and wears the Star of David as an earring in his left lobe.

This massive influx of thieves at the Belomorkanal allowed for criminal motifs to emerge in many of the cultural products from the project. The only woman truly respected according to criminal mores, the mother, was the subject of much prisoner poetry, some of it quite sentimental with titles like “Romance” (*Romans*).³³² In addition, there was the ubiquitous presence of card games, that all-important activity in the world of thieves. The latter was itself often like a type of performance, since other prisoners would typically crowd around and watch games in action.³³³ Just like with the criminal world as a whole, these card games had strict rules and criminals could play only specifically criminal—and not *fraer*—games with fellow convicts. The outcome of such games could have drastic consequences, with a loss incurring anything from the removal of a gold tooth by hammer to the ripping off of an ear to the end of life itself. The obsession with card playing serves as a metaphor for the criminal realm as a whole, since the element of risk in gambling parallels the excitement in committing crimes.³³⁴ The adrenaline rush experienced when stealing, in turn, was described in the memoirs of many prisoners, a feeling that made the life of crime addictive. Some skills inherited by a thieving life were reconstituted as special talents that could actually help the Canal’s administration; in his story “Filter” (*Fil'tr*) the prisoner Mikhail Koldobenko claimed his years in the criminal world helped him to develop a keen eye for recognizing mistakes, including technical ones: “Believe me. After ten years of criminal life, I can punish things exactly. My eye is a microscope. Reliable. For one ruble I can

³³² RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 34, l. 30-31.

³³³ Dmitri Likhachev, “Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov,” *Stat'i rannikh let* (Tver': Tverskoe oblastnoe otdelenie rossiiskogo fonda kul'tury, 1993): 45-53, 46.

³³⁴ Ibid, 46-52.

offer a hundred. And I know what mistakes smell like.”³³⁵ The criminal eye, which must be observant and astute at all times, here can adapt its abilities to a drastically different context.³³⁶

The prisoners at the Belomorkanal, through the process of re-forging, were also meant to become “cultured” in the larger, more Russian sense of the word.³³⁷ In learning manners like cleanliness and respect and skills like reading, writing, and professional training, the authorities hoped that the prisoners’ reeducation would extend beyond the work conducted at the Canal. This kind of moral training related directly to the Cultural Revolution at work in the country as a whole from 1928-31. An article in *Perekovka* addressed the importance of living civilly, claiming that the prisoners had to be careful about cleanliness and garbage and needed to take care of their living spaces in order “to live pleasantly, civilly, and healthily.”³³⁸ The prisoner G. Mel'nikov, in his essay “From the Baltic [Sea] to the White [Sea]” (*Ot belogo do baltiiskogo*), claimed that at the Canal “a new manner of life was born,” with the Russian word *byt* implying everyday customs, household matters and cultural life.³³⁹ In his essays, Sergei Alymov also pointed to cleanliness as a vital aspect of maintaining the proper atmosphere at the Canal, noting the importance of keeping kitchen areas clean, since prisoners were going to the infirmary with dysentery.³⁴⁰ Yet Alymov claimed in his notes that they had achieved miracles in all areas, from

³³⁵ «Поверьте мне. За десять лет блатной жизни, точно наказываю вещи. Глаз мой микроскоп. Верно. За рубль – сто отвечаю. И ошибки знаю чем пахнут,» RGALI, f. 1185, op. 3, d. 33, l. 104.

³³⁶ Another example comes from the manuscript draft of the *Istoriia stroitel'stva*: «Агитбригадник Володька-Кузнецов, в прошлом отъявленная шпана, рассказывает: – У нас у всех глаз юркий, воровской, особенный глаз, зрачком вкось: все видит. Сегодня, к примеру, я узнаю, что возят торф, а тачки у них спальные, – значит меньшего размера, для скалы, которые. Это все равно что воду рюмками пить, тьфу. Разве это не вредительство? И кто мне этот материал сообщил? Свой, бывший жулик, и на кого? На десятника, который тоже из уголовного мира,» f. 7952, op. 7, d. 73 (XI глава, 2 вариант), l. 30. (This section crossed out by editors).

³³⁷ For an elaboration on the specifically Russian connotation of the term in the 1920s-1930s, where the term cultural person collapsed “all differential descriptions,” see Mikhail N. Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (NY: St. Martin's, 1999), 36.

³³⁸ «Приятно, культурно и здорово жить,» *Perekovka* 40 (11 June 1932), 10.

³³⁹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 148.

³⁴⁰ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 21, l. 101.

financial to sanitary, from forest to bathhouse.³⁴¹ Maintaining cleanliness, therefore, was nearly as important as the construction of the Canal itself. Even the *History of the Construction* contains a lengthy section on washing laundry at the camp site, a mundane and everyday task that was elevated to a matter of supreme importance in the larger battle of the Cultural Revolution.³⁴²

In her groundbreaking work on hooliganism, Joan Neuberger examines the relationship between class conflict and cultural identity against the backdrop of crime. Neuberger claims that the rise of hooliganism in the 1920s created a clash between barbarism and civilization, thereby prompting a discussion of culture and definition of identities.³⁴³ Crime is an ideal backdrop for such a discussion, “because it provides one of the few instances in which classes actually interact, right on the street,”³⁴⁴ or as in the present research, at the site of the labor camp with its diverse working population. Neuberger links hooliganism with revolution and claims that such transgression is a growing, but controversial, topic in 1905 St. Petersburg. I would also link hooliganism with revolution, but in this case with the Cultural Revolution of 1928-1931. The large proportion of criminal prisoners at the Belomorkanal, often externally described as “hooligans” (*khuligany*)³⁴⁵ alongside more educated, as well as international, convicts necessarily introduces class and cultural conflict as well as attempts to define identity (the most prevalent being autobiographical prisoner tales of re-forging, discussed in the next section). In addition, while hooliganism may have still been controversial in the early twentieth century, by

³⁴¹ Ibid, I. 23.

³⁴² For a further treatment of the Cultural Revolution and its moral dictates, see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931* (Bloomington: Indian UP, 1978) and Kate Transchel, *Under the Influence: Working Class Drinking, Temperance and Cultural Revolution in Russia 1895-1932* (Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2006).

³⁴³ Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg 1900-1914*. Berkeley: U California P, 1993. 3-5.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 5.

³⁴⁵ For example, see *Karelo-Murmanskii krai* 5-6 (20 July 1933): 25.

the early 1930s it is already a popularized phenomenon, helped in part by Maksim Gor'kii's romantic tales from the criminal world, the futurist and avant-garde embrace of hooliganism, and the massive influx of newly literate citizens into public discourse.³⁴⁶ The privileging of criminal prisoners at the Belmorkanal in and of itself foregrounds their experiences, with even the propagandistic *History of the Construction* seeming to glamorize, rather than condemn, the *blatnoi* lifestyle. The 1930s also witnessed the emergence of a new type of criminology in which the focus shifts from the supposedly inherent characteristics of the criminal to the society that produces the prisoner.³⁴⁷ Similarly, the foundational work of the re-educative Soviet penal system, *From Punishment to Work* (discussed in Chapter One), focuses on how capitalist societies produce criminals rather than attributing crime to some type of innate quality of the prisoner—with the latter tendency identified as part of Nazi deterministic philosophy. The adoption of this stance is necessary for the possibility of *perekovka*; in order for prisoners to be re-forged, their personalities must be malleable and not intrinsic. Just as the rise of hooliganism allows for a discussion of culture and identity at the beginning of the 20th century, so does the import of criminal prisoners at the Belomorkanal create a particular environment in which issues of class, tradition, and custom are not only discussed but significantly altered.

³⁴⁶ For example, the popular illustrated magazine *Thirty Days (30 dnei)* often includes short stories and articles about the criminal world in its issues from the early 1930s. Stories such as “Bandit” (18-24) and “Razgovor v tiurme” (61-62) are a few examples, from the March 1934 issue of the magazine.

³⁴⁷ Neuberger, 12.

2.3.1 Criminal Autobiographies as Quasi-Religious Conversion Narratives: Vasilii

Atiasov, A. K. Ivanov, Grigorii Koshelev, Orest Viazemskii, Mikhail Koldobenko

The similarity between socialist realism's master plot and the standard narrative of re-forging from the Belomorkanal has already been discussed in Chapter One. It is now possible to turn to specific examples of these autobiographies, mostly written by criminals, to interpret their patterns more closely. Authorities encouraged prisoners who were "successful" in their re-forging to pen life stories describing their transformations. Most of these texts include proclamations of enthusiastic loyalty to the state, often following a formula: after the moralizing influence of reading *Perekovka* and the assistance of the *vospitatel'*, the prisoner abandons his or her criminal past, re-thinks his or her childhood, and subsequently becomes incorporated into the "workers' family" (*sem'ia trudiashikhsia*) at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. This conversion trajectory subsumes the previous two categories of Press and Performance, offering a final move in the establishment of a utopian, constructed subjectivity³⁴⁸—the prisoner is first "inspired" to transform himself by reading the camp newspaper *Perekovka* or by speaking with its correspondents; the prisoner subsequently "performs"³⁴⁹ his or her identity as a newly re-forged prisoner; and finally, a testament of this new being is offered through the written word, the life story.

³⁴⁸ The idea of "utopian subjectivity" will play an important role in this final section, because like the Canal project itself, it is an absurd paradox—subjectivity cannot exist in a utopian environment, in which the distinctions among individuals are ultimately entirely erased.

³⁴⁹ This notion of performance, here in quotation marks, echoes Judith Butler's work on identity as a type of performance. In addition, since some of the prisoners were likely feigning their allegiance to the Canal project so as to garner special rewards, convict behavior at the Belomorkanal also has a literal component of performing.

If we adopt Michel Foucault's supposition that the word is equivalent to power, the documentation of these miraculous conversions creates a rule of law pregnant with propagandistic and quasi-religious motifs. The Canal project is ultimately intended to be more than a pedagogical experience and much more than merely a collection of locks, dams, and dikes—instead, it represents life itself, a metaphorical and utopian homeland in which all notions of subjectivity are entirely dissolved. As the prisoner Vasilii Fedorovich Atiasov explains in his autobiography, “I myself have a wife and four children and I once thought about them [...] Yes, I’m happy to give everything to my beloved BMS,³⁵⁰ it is our pride, our beauty. And here in this rock, in this water I found my happiness, my pathway to life.”³⁵¹ Atiasov is able to surrender all allegiances, even those to wife and children, in his romantic adoration of the Canal because the project supersedes all earthly concerns; it addresses the existential issues of satisfaction and splendor.³⁵²

The stress on the life story in both prisoner and non-prisoner works about the Canal has a direct parallel with the biographical pattern evident in socialist realism after 1932.³⁵³ Part of the import of the biographical strain stems from the importance of the “positive hero” as perhaps the most recognizable, defining feature of socialist realism. The positive hero, emblematic of Bolshevik ideals, is often so generic and featureless so as to appear not like an individual but

³⁵⁰ BMS is an acronym for the Canal construction, *Belomorstroï*.

³⁵¹ «Я сам имею жену, 4 детей, и мне про них некогда думать [...] Да, я же все отдам за любимый БМС, это наша гордость, наша краса. Я здесь в этой скале, в этом плывуне нашел свое счастье, путевку в жизнь.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 9.

³⁵² Atiasov's statement echoes the previously-discussed phenomenon of *besprizornye*, where allegiance to the state was substituted for familial love. For a further treatment of this topic, see Alan M. Ball, *Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia 1918-1930* (Berkeley: U California P, 1994). Interestingly, the phrase Atiasov uses to describe his transformative trajectory, “*putevka v zhizn'*,” is identical to the name of Nikolai Ekk's 1931 film in which young delinquents are brought to a special camp in order to be reformed (*Putevka v zhizn'*, *Road to Life*). See also the earlier discussion of romantic love for the Canal project.

³⁵³ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 45.

rather like a hagiography.³⁵⁴ Such is also often the case with the re-forged prisoner: newly devoted and dramatically transformed, he is no longer discernible from the other convicts around him. Following the religious motif, the re-forging narratives are so ritualized and repetitive as to appear as a type of conversion narrative, similar to what Mircea Eliade would call an initiation ceremony. In this move, prisoners perform a type of selfhood in an attempt to assure their survival and through this performance Soviet propaganda is internalized while all evidence of individuality is dissolved. Paradoxically, however, in order to erase this subjectivity, prisoners must first narrate the specific details of their past lives in their autobiographies.³⁵⁵ In order to rescue some sort of element of these convicts' identities, it is crucial to look at the specific details of their life stories as well as the more general conversion patterns.

The short story "Karas'," by the prisoner A. K. Ivanov, is a productive example of a conversion narrative; although it is not written as an autobiographical submission, it follows the same pattern of a re-forging narrative and addresses important aspects of subjectivity. The title itself, which means a "wide-hipped woman" in criminal slang,³⁵⁶ is a *klichka* (nickname) for the main character and represents his position within the criminal world (i.e., feminized and subservient). Interestingly, the prisoner who submitted the story first wrote it in the third person, saying "he" (*on*) did this or that, but subsequently changed the third-person to first-person, scribbling out the previous pronouns in what was perhaps an attempt to render the story more realistic and personal, as if it were a true life story. Similarly, while the story is signed by A. K. Ivanov, the name "Karas'" is also scribbled more hastily next to his own real name, perhaps another last-minute effort to make the story appear as autobiography.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 47.

³⁵⁵ This process could also be likened to the performance of last rites, a final confession of one's soul. In both instances, a previous way of life—or life itself—is abolished to make possible a higher, more ideological existence.

³⁵⁶ Vladimir Shlyakhov and Eve Adler, eds., *Russian Slang and Colloquial Expressions* (NY: Barron's, 1999), 104.

This story has many of the characteristic features of the re-forging narrative. Most important is the role played by the *vospitatel'* (educator), who is likened to a father figure, “I listened attentively to the educator’s speech. It seemed to me as if the educator was speaking to me like my father who was killed in the war.”³⁵⁷ While the physical speech of the reformer-educator is often the first stage in the transformation,³⁵⁸ the second often came at night, during sleep or dreams, when the ideas spoken earlier have the opportunity to coalesce and take hold.³⁵⁹ Some prisoners also imagine the dreams of their loved ones at home; in the diary of one prisoner, he pictures his wife Olia dreaming about her drunken, wild husband with a knife in his hands, and he tries to assure her that this really is just a dream—now he is no longer a murderous maniac but is reading books and sitting in a Lenin Corner.³⁶⁰ In all of these cases, dreams are related directly to the past and are a way of surveying memories in order to transcend them.³⁶¹ Karas' could not fall asleep the night after his conversation with the *vospitatel'*, and he reviews his life history, in particular his difficult familial situation; “My thoughts sped away far into the past, remembering my father who did not return from the war. They killed him. I was seven years old. Finding out about the death of my father, my mother cried loudly. She also died in

³⁵⁷ «Внимательно слушал я речь воспитателя. Мне казалось, что воспитатель говорит мне, мой отец тоже погиб на войне.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 65.

³⁵⁸ The importance of dialogue in the conversion of prisoners, it should be noted, also highlights the important role of oral phenomena at the Belomorkanal.

³⁵⁹ Another example of the transformative power of dreams occurs in the short story “Bura,” where the main character, during his “sleepless” (*bezsonnye*) nights, remembers all of his past crimes and criminal life in general, thinking about how all his friends had forgotten him. Books, newspapers, and education facilitate his transformation, making it appropriate that he would define his conversion in enlightenment terms, that he went “from the darkness to the light,” (*iz mraka k svetu*). RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 33, l. 119-23.

³⁶⁰ «Оля наверное проснулась и опять перед ее глазами встает пьяный с ножом в руках и звериными глазами Прокофий Федорович. Нет Оля – это твоё воображение. Я сижу в Ленинском уголке и читаю книги.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 30.

³⁶¹ In addition to the function of facilitating *perekovka* and life examination, dreams also act as an escape from the prisoner’s everyday reality, a realm in which one is truly free. See detailed discussion of this phenomenon in Chapter One.

1917.”³⁶² Like so many other prisoners at the Belomorkanal, this character is an orphan and finds a substitute family in his re-educator and in the ethos of the state. In order to accomplish this conversion, the past life must be confronted and remembered before being forgotten; Karas' wakes up the next day after his prophetic dream and decides to begin working. In the symbolic finale of the story, the character loses his old nickname of “Karas” and now everyone calls him by his full name, Aleksei Ivanovich (very similar to the prisoner's real name of A. K. Ivanov), in an effort to recognize his new-found appreciation for a dignified, laboring lifestyle.³⁶³

The prisoner autobiography by Gigorii Ivanovich Koshelev, entitled “My Path” (*Moi put'*) is a particularly illuminating example of the conversion narrative, because the prisoner discusses in great detail his criminal life before entering BelBaltLag, demonstrating how the pathway to crime can mirror the pathway to socialist labor. As usual, familial problems serve as the generator of a life of crime for Koshelev: his father went to war in 1914 and his mother subsequently died of hunger, leaving him to search the streets, dirty and cold, for nourishment. He soon meets and befriends Vas'ka-Svistun (“Vaska the Whistler,” or, in slang, “Vaska the Liar”), a criminal and avid vodka drinker, and asks the drunkard how he is able to procure so much food and drink. Koshelev is so amazed by his ability to live so well that he “decides to start upon this path.”³⁶⁴ It is interesting that the author uses the same—and very loaded—term in Russian for the pathway that brings him down to a life of crime as well as the pathway that brings him to a life of honest labor: *put'*. In a way, it is possible to see Vas'ka-Svistun as a sort of inverse *vospitatel'*; a teacher or reformer who educates him about a life of stealing rather than a

³⁶² «Крепко запала мне в голову речь воспитателя. Далеко в прошлое уносила мысль моя. Вспомня я отца своего, который не вернулся с войны. Убили его. Мне было 7 лет. Узнав о смерти отца, громко плакала мать. В 1917 г. умерла и она.» Ibid, l. 65.

³⁶³ Ibid, l. 66.

³⁶⁴ «Что решил вступить на этот путь,» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 105.

life of labor and also changes his world and habits, albeit in the opposite way. Koshelev's first try at thievery, however, does not work out so well; in his attempt to steal a bag of bread from a peasant woman, he is knocked to the ground and loses three teeth (teeth he is still missing).

Koshelev travels from city to city, picking up additional nicknames and additional jail time along the way. While he at first follows Vas'ka-Svistun like a loyal puppy dog and devoted protégé, he eventually loses track of him. In 1929, he is sent to Solovki, where he still refuses to give up his old ways and still dreams of his former friend and father figure, "the whole time traveling in the train I was playing cards and thinking about the past, drunken, merry days, about Vas'ka Svistun, dreaming about somehow running away and meeting with Vas'ka once again to start thieving."³⁶⁵ Then, the unexpected happens—one day Koshelev meets his pal Vas'ka on the camp site but barely recognizes him; Vas'ka is now the head of a shock-worker brigade, literate and cultured. Although Vas'ka continually tries to convince his friend to change to a working lifestyle, Koshelev does not want to hear about it, and he eventually begins avoiding his former partner-in-crime. Vas'ka may have served as his *vospitatel'* for the criminal world, but he does not play this role in Koshelev's reverse trajectory—it is not a reformer that eventually convinces Koshelev to adopt a life of labor, but rather the peer pressure of his fellow prisoners:

And so there was a despicable attitude against me. In the kitchen they opened the windows and hung loafers, they started to write my name on the black board of shame and in the wall newspapers, spreading it throughout the entire camp, through the radio and paper that I am a loafer, an idler, wherever I went everyone began laughing and making fun of me. I was alone in the company and every day

³⁶⁵ «Я ехал в поезде всю дорогу играл в карты вспоминал о прошлых пьяных веселых днях о Васке Свистуне мечтал как бы сбежать и вновь встретиться с Ваской и начать воровать.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 107.

the educator (*vospitatel'*) Zarybaev led discussions, talking about the free, Soviet country and how it was impossible not to work living in the USSR.³⁶⁶

This recollection is particularly revealing, because it suggests how massive the Panopticon of propaganda was at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. In anticipation of what was to occur (or was already occurring) in the country as a whole, the camp site was a completely wired, virtual media frenzy where information was controlled and disseminated in particularly incriminating ways against those who did not fall in line. Although the *vospitatel'* was omnipresent, more often than not shame and perennial teasing seemed to be the method—and one that was truly successful—in convincing recalcitrant prisoners to begin working.

While Koshelev does eventually begin working and reading newspapers, becoming literate, he claims merely that he “got used to the educator” (*ia privyk k vospitateliu*) and not that he was truly swayed by him. When he sees Vas'ka again, the former criminal is being freed early as one of the best shock-workers; Vas'ka later writes his friend that he is now working on the Moscow-Kurskii railroad line as a conductor. Vas'ka, therefore, exchanged his metaphorical *put'* for a literal one, leaving behind the pathway to crime to follow the more entrenched, straight path of the railroad tracks. Koshelev ends his autobiography by thanking his comrades for putting him on the proper *put'*, one that no longer follows crime but instead a life of work. This emphasis on the pathway traveled not only likens the autobiography to a travel narrative, but also relates it to a utopian vision, in which a certain route must be followed in order to arrive in an idealized world.

³⁶⁶ «Но как подло все было настроение против меня. На кухне открыли окно лодырей вывесили меня на черную доску стали писать в стенгазету передавали на весь лагерь через радио газету что я лодырь и филон куда я не пойду все надо мной стали смеяться все против меня. Я одинок в роте ежедневно воспитатель Зарыбаев проводил беседы рассказывал о свободной советской стране и почему нельзя не работать живя в СССР.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 108.

Like Koshelev, the prisoner Orest Valer'ianovich Viazemskii falls under the influence of a criminal-world educator, Semen, and Viazemskii highlights the allure inherent in a life of crime in his description of Semen:

I have to say the people who are used to a more refined life of the mind are worse off in terms of their personal qualities than people who are closer to life, who address danger as a trade. Maybe to charge them is not possible, because for them, as Semen said, life seems vapid if they are not exposed to danger. I advised him to become a pilot, or that he should understand the construction's fervor. He finished a ton of courses, he was a tractor driver, he was in Pioneer camp, but he always returned to the dangerous life. He remains one of the brightest of all my memories.³⁶⁷

Semen, unlike Vas'ka, cannot be re-forged even though he might try to re-educate himself. Almost like a drug user, he is addicted to the life of crime. His depiction of the criminal life harkens back to the early stages of criminology, where it was supposed that the desire to transgress the law was something inborn and innate, impossible to shed.

The autobiography of the prisoner Mikhail Koldobenko, who also submitted fictional stories to the *Perekovka* literary competitions, is another example of a re-forging tale that concentrates more on the pathway to the criminal world than the road to socialism, its narrative offering an interesting glimpse into the psychology of crime. Born in 1901, Koldobenko has memories of growing up with his drunk father whose life advice (in addition to quitting school)

³⁶⁷«Нужно сказать, что люди, которые привыкли к более утонченной умственной жизни, в отношении личных качеств ниже, чем люди, которые ближе к жизни, которые обращаются с опасностью как с ремеслом. Может быть их и обвинять в этом нельзя, а им, как говорил Семен, жизнь кажется пресной, если они не подвергаются опасности. Я ему советовал быть летчиком, или он должен был бы понять пафос стройки. Он кончил массу курсов, был и трактористом, был и в пионерском лагере, но возвращался всегда к опасной жизни. Он является одним из наиболее ярких моих воспоминаний.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 58.

consisted of: “You struggle really hard—like fish beating against the ice—but still you have nothing to eat. But they suck your blood like spiders.”³⁶⁸ Koldobenko begins working at the age of sixteen in a factory, and when World War I breaks out he begins to feel like a real man; he gets married, he is not afraid of death, and he loves to work. With the sudden death of his wife in childbirth, however, his life falls apart: “right away life snapped [...] and so stretched on the boring, gray days.”³⁶⁹ He sees death everywhere and is solely responsible for his young daughter; eventually he takes to drink. When he marries again, his second wife turns out to be a “meshchanka” (a member of the petty bourgeoisie, or someone of narrow tastes and interests) who does not like to work, loves to go out, and has a fondness for sweets. When she suggests to him that they could wound the child with a needle in the top of the head, causing her to die without anyone noticing, he decides to leave her, finds a third wife, and gives up drinking for a year. Yet in the end, it is his alcoholism that leads to imprisonment—after a verbal, then physical, fight with a friend at the *Logashev* restaurant, he is sent to the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

While we have already seen examples (and will see more) of the psychological and adrenaline pull towards a life of crime, Koldobenko’s road to prison is related directly to alcohol. At the camp site, he claims to be captured by the idea of physical work, which is the best way for him to address his drunkenness, “Prison is a good school for drunkards. It turns them towards a new life [...] I regret only one thing: that I landed late in prison, thank you Soviet power for returning me to life. Thank you to the camps of the OGPU for its humanitarian approach to

³⁶⁸ «Бьешься как рыба об лед, а жрать нечего. А они как пауки кровь сосут.» RGALI, f. 1885, d. 3, op. 38, l. 70.

³⁶⁹ «И вот вам сразу порвалась жизнь [...] Потянулись скучные серые дни.» Ibid, l. 72.

criminals.”³⁷⁰ In his oath of allegiance, Koldobenko reinforces the notion of *perekovka* as a successful way to refashion prisoners and also frames his transformation in pedagogical terms, calling the prison a “school.” While Koldobenko’s description of the OGPU as “humanitarian” may seem absurd, it is important to put such an assertion into context with the rest of his life story.

Interestingly, the prisoner ends his narrative with a statement in all capitals that this is “how the steel was tempered”³⁷¹ before signing his name. Such a pronouncement immediately brings to mind the identically-titled socialist-realist classic by Nikolai Ostrovskii *How the Steel Was Tempered* (*Kak zakalialas' stal'*, 1932-1934), which—significantly—was published as a model socialist-realist work after Koldobenko wrote his autobiography, confirming how texts produced at the White Sea-Baltic Canal at times seem to anticipate what will become popular outside the camp confines. In another parallel with a socialist-realist classic, the prisoner Fillipp Iakovlevich Kabanenko (who interestingly refers to himself as “comrade” rather than “canal-army soldier,” the appropriate substitute) recalls how he injured both his legs at the work site and had to be carried by his brigade, and despite not healing well, insists on continuing to work with his bandaged legs.³⁷² This autobiographical detail echoes Boris Polevoi’s socialist-realist novel *Story about a Real Man* (*Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*, 1946), which concerns the plight of a Soviet pilot who lost both his legs but still flew in service to his country.

³⁷⁰ «Лагеря это хорошая школа для пьяниц. Она их возвращает к новой жизни [...] Жалею одно: поздно попал в лагеря, спасибо Советской Власти что она меня возвратила к жизни. Спасибо лагерям ОГПУ за ее гуманный к преступникам подход.» RGALI, f. 1885, d. 3, op. 38, l. 73.

³⁷¹ «Так закалилась сталь,» Ibid.

³⁷² GARF, f. 7952, l. 133.

2.3.2 Women's Criminal Autobiographies: Lidiia Isaeva, Praskov'ia Skachko, Motia Podgoskaia

In prisoner autobiographies, many cite lack of money, the death of parents, and constant hunger as reasons for falling into the criminal world, with the Russian Civil War as the most traumatic event in their lives, when they often lost loved ones, as well as all means of sustenance. Women criminal prisoners often explain their “fall” into the criminal lifestyle somewhat differently, emphasizing psychological elements of shame and humiliation rather than the outside influence of physical, material circumstances. One female prisoner, Lidiia Zakharavna Isaeva, who after describing her routine of living on the streets or at friends’ houses, occupying herself with pick-pocketing, drunkenness, and sleeping around, claims she finally rejected this lifestyle out of the shame it caused her.³⁷³ In her life story, Isaeva chooses to emphasize the psychological elements that comprise an unlawful lifestyle—the disgrace of her drunkenness and the peer pressure of her friends to continue committing crimes³⁷⁴—rather than her new-found love of labor at the Belomorkanal. While she does include the latter in her life story, there are only the common, generic-sounding phrases of “through work comes correction” and “there will be no return to the old ways.”³⁷⁵ The female prisoner Elena Alekseevna Il'inichna also views her past in a larger context, something that causes her to break down emotionally when a fellow performer in *Shalman* describes his transformation, ““And you know, Lena, today I saw my life in a big

³⁷³ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 50.

³⁷⁴ The influence of friends in the criminal world is often cited by both male and female prisoners as a reason for remaining in this realm. Although women seem to acknowledge the psychological aspects more, men tend to attribute their behavior to outside influences. A male account of such peer pressure explains how it was only the influence of friends that brought him back to a life of crime after he had already tried to go straight: RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 63.

³⁷⁵ «Через труд к исправлению идет», and «возвратить к старому больше нет.» Ibid.

mirror.’ These words hit me hard, and I couldn’t find something to say in return besides bitterly crying. Yes, I saw my past life in a big mirror.”³⁷⁶

The female prisoner Praskov'ia Alekseevna Skachko describes the humiliation in her family poetically, claiming that constant need, hunger, and cold “surrounded her entire family like a black cloud” (*kak chernaia tucha okružhili vsiu nashu sem'iu*).³⁷⁷ When the children at school laugh at her because she has no food, she decides to start going to the market to steal sustenance. The teasing continues, however, and she eventually begins skipping school. When her father receives a note from her teacher about her absences and subsequently learns about her thefts, he punishes her severely and symbolically, cutting off her long, beautiful braids that were envy of all the school, claiming the family is poor but honest.³⁷⁸

When her father begins drinking, Praskov'ia falls even deeper into the criminal realm, arrested first when she is eleven and again when she is fourteen. She actually enjoys the environment in her first prison; since she is so young, everyone is in love with her, and she is allowed to walk around everywhere, doing whatever she wants. She falls in love with an older prisoner and promises to wait for his release, a year-and-a-half after hers. She is not yet sixteen when they are married and soon becomes pregnant. Her husband, whose trade in prison was making false documents, initiates her even further into the criminal world, convincing her to steal in church, which turns out to be a profitable business for them:

He began to convince me, assure me, that there shouldn't be any fear, since there isn't any god. [...] I must say, that there is not a better or less dangerous job—it's

³⁷⁶ «А знаешь, что, Лена, я сегодня увидела свою жизнь в большом зеркале. На меня эти слова громом обрушились и не нашлась что-либо ответить, кроме того, что горько заплакала. Да, я увидела прошлую жизнь в большом зеркале.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 3.

³⁷⁷ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 271.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 272.

in the church. When god's sheep let loose their drool and all the strings of their soul, sweetly raising their eyes to the church heavens, asking for happiness and riches—at this time without any difficulty, you can freely clean out all of his pockets, and he will peacefully and reverently stare at some unseen point, and just as you've cleaned out his pockets, he begins to zealously cross his sheep's forehead.³⁷⁹

Praskov'ia and her husband make an excellent living this way. They buy new furniture, have more children, attend luxurious parties, and send presents home to their families. Now living in Odessa, they even have the police, who purposely ignore their infractions, on their side. Everyone is jealous of their exorbitant, charmed lifestyle.

Yet when Praskov'ia's husband dies in 1910, followed soon after by one of her children, she becomes afraid and her life suddenly changes. She becomes more careful in her thieving, she marries again but this husband soon dies, and the next man she lives with is an awful drunkard. Without her former life of luxury and comfort—and the self-confidence that accompanied it—Praskov'ia can no longer successfully ply her trade. In the art of stealing, appearance is of the utmost importance: “My misfortune lay in my external appearance—in my clothes, and I had lousy clothes, which, of course, did not suit my work. And I must say, that a good pickpocket must be well-dressed, for only then is it possible to work.”³⁸⁰ When Praskov'ia is caught, as she

³⁷⁹ «Начал меня уговаривать, уверять, что не должно быть никакого страха, так как нет и никакого бога.» [...] «Должна сказать, что нет лучшей и безопаснейшей работы – это в церкви. Когда «божии овцы» распускают слюни и все струнки своей души, умилительно поднимает глаза к церковному небу, просят о счастии и благополучии – в это время без всякого затруднения, свободно очищаешь все его карманы, а он спокойно и благоговейно продолжает пялить глаза в невиданную какую-то точку, или как только очистишь карман, начинает усердно крестить свой бараний лоб.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 275.

³⁸⁰ «Неудача заключалась в наружном виде – в одежде, а у меня скверная одеженка которая, конечно, не подходила к моей работе. А должна сказать, что хороший карманщик, должен быть хорошо одетым, тогда только можно работать.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 276.

is time and again, she never admits to any kind of wrongdoing, but rather simply says she is “unlucky” (*ne povezlo*).

When Praskov'ia finally tires of the criminal life, her description of defeat sounds strangely similar to those associated with the suffering during Stalinist terror; “I wanted a quiet life, I didn’t want to steal anymore. I was sick of this life. I was sick of trembling at every step for my freedom and being scared by rustling and knocks. Every rustle made me think, here they are coming again for you. But it is so hard to get off of this road, when your life itself is already placed on a slippery path. I found myself on this path again.”³⁸¹ Praskov'ia’s story, in the end, gives us not only a woman’s perspective but also the complexities and characteristics of a life of crime: how it begins, how it continues, how it is difficult to abandon. She also continues with the motif of *put'*, a notion that is an important ideological concept at the time and echoes once again the style of travel narrative. The path towards a life of crime can be as alluring and unavoidable as the path towards re-forging, although the latter option, of course, must be the final choice.

At the White Sea-Baltic Canal, Praskov'ia discovers that everyone can work—even though she never had before in her life—and she becomes a shock-worker. She concludes her autobiography with an interesting metaphor for the Belomorkanal, “About camp I can say one thing: that it is not a camp, but a factory—a factory of people, where from the dregs of society and refuse of humankind the new man is forged,”³⁸² continuing with the “factory of life” metaphor discussed earlier in “Endi” Dmitriev’s work. Praskov'ia imagines the prison camp as a

³⁸¹ «Хотелось спокойной жизни, не хотелось воровать больше. Надоела эта жизнь. Надоело дрожать на каждом шагу за свободу и пугаться шелеста и стука. Ибо каждый шорох давал чувствовать себя и думать, что вот опять идут за тобой. Но страшно трудно сойти с этой дороги, когда сама жизнь ставит тебя на скользкий путь. На таком пути очутилась я снова.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 276.

³⁸² «О лагере могу сказать одно: что это не лагерь, а фабрика – фабрика людей, где из подонков общества и отбросов человечества выковывается новый человек.» Ibid, l. 277.

producer of goods (see the discussion of factories in Chapter One), where people are the main ware. Praskov'ia is already imagining the concept of the *novyi chelovek* (New Man) and its relationship to Soviet society. Michel Foucault also imagines prison to be a factory-like machine, in which the prisoners are both the cogs of the machine and the products that are produced; in this way, prison entirely occupies those who are incarcerated. As Michel Foucault would argue, prison in the twentieth century is intended to be more than just imprisonment; it is meant to transform and punish the soul.³⁸³ The factory of life metaphor relates directly to the notion of utopian subjectivity; in a factory, all the goods of the same sort are meant to be identical, pressed out in similar forms by mechanical machines. Similarly, utopian subjectivity is not really subjectivity at all—instead, all constructs of the individual are erased in the name of the greater good and the larger community.

In her autobiography, Motia Podgorskaia also addresses the specific problems women face in entering the criminal world. Motia loses both of her parents when she is three years old and spends her childhood in an orphanage. It is there, at the age of fourteen, that she meets a thirty-year-old officer whose promise of food entices her back to his apartment, where he feeds her and then rapes her. When he later asks her to strip and perform tricks for him, she refuses, and he chases her away. She has similar experiences with other men until she eventually falls into prostitution:

Finally, I became what you would call a prostitute. But my soul wanted love. It wanted tenderness and a cozy nook. But it was only dreams, dreams, where is your sweetness?³⁸⁴ I turned seventeen. To sell one's body at this age? There was no support from anywhere. I didn't hear tender words; I had no one to

³⁸³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 16, 242.

³⁸⁴ This phrase (*mechty, mechty, gde vasha sladost'*) comes from Aleksandr Pushkin's 1816 poem "Probuzhdenie."

complain to. And so I reached prison. I looked at the world with contempt. Not a bit of hope or faith. Now I am a person active in social life.³⁸⁵

Motia compares the relatively good conditions in prison to her previous life, mentioning the availability of sausage, clean sheets, and almost daily baths (Motia's favorable description of camp conditions seems to be exaggerated, as the possibility for such frequent bathing at a Gulag camp would be virtually impossible). Yet despite these supposedly favorable conditions, Motia cites the hardships in prison as being the best teacher: "Life in the camps trained you to fight for existence, to believe deeply in your own strength. In the camps your character is forged: resolutely going towards an outlined goal."³⁸⁶ Once again, the notion of *put'* is highlighted in her transformation, even if she does not use the actual term. Motia's rather romantic story of overcoming hardship was exactly the sort of narrative the authorities wanted to cull for inclusion in the biographically-themed *History of the Construction*.

Women also faced specific problems at the camp site with which men did not have to contend. Perhaps the most prominent of such issues was the prevalence of sexually-deprived males walking about freely in a camp site that was only loosely divided according to gender. Prisoners had the ability to sleep in different places, and many women slept at the work site rather than returning to their bunks so as to avoid sexually-crazed men and the general bazaar-like atmosphere in the noisy barracks.³⁸⁷ Women, however, had to deal not only with drunken

³⁸⁵ «Наконец, добились того, что стала называться проституткой. А душа хотела любви. Хотела ласки и уютного уголка. И это было только: мечты, мечты, где ваша сладость. Стукнуло 17 лет. В эти годы торговать своим телом? Поддержки же не было ниоткуда. Не слышу ласковых слов, некому пожаловаться. Так докатилась до лагерей. На мир смотрела с презрением. Веры и надежды ни на грош. Сейчас я общественница.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 32, l. 7.

³⁸⁶ «Жизнь в лагерях приучила бороться за существование, глужба [sic] верить, в свои силы. В лагерях выковался характер: твердо итти [sic] к намеченной цели.» Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 112.

men, but also intoxicated women from the criminal population. The philosopher and Belomorkanal prisoner Iuliia Danzas recalled the horrific scene:

The generally frightening human hodgepodge was burdened with an enormous mass of men, prowling about like wolves around our barracks [...] using the greater freedom found here than at Solovki to walk around the entire camp where there are more than 30,000 men crowded together, and like us, fenced in by barbed wire on this territory. That's why, from the evening and through the length of the night, were brought in tens of drunk women, who sobered up next to us or right above our heads if they got up to the second level of bunk beds.³⁸⁸

At first glance, the specific issues faced by women at the camp site as well as their different explanations of their pathway to crime may seem to offer individualized, highly personal and emotional narratives where subjectivity is determined—at least in part—by female identity. Despite these elements, however, the ideal of utopian subjectivity still reigns supreme: all follow the moralizing path of *perekovka* and eventually become featureless subjects in the Belomorkanal homeland.

³⁸⁸ Iuliia Danzas, *Krasnaia katorga* excerpt in Losev, *Radost' na veki*: «Обычная ужасная человеческая мешанина отягощалась огромной массы мужчин, рыскавших, как волки, вокруг нашего барака [...] пользовались здесь большей свободой, чем на Соловках, разгуливали по всему лагерю, где более тридцати тысяч мужчин теснились, как и мы, на этой территории, огороженной колючей проволокой. Поэтому, с вечера и на протяжении всей ночи, в барак вносили десятки пьяных женщин, которые протрезвлялись рядом с нами или прямо на наших головах, если их укладывали на второй этаж нар...» 203.

2.3.3 Violating the Norm: Autobiographies that Challenge the Re-Forging Master Plot

Although most of these criminal autobiographies follow the formula of an initial stage of laziness; a second stage of contemplation (whether through the *vospitatel'*, reflection on earlier life, prophetic dreams, or intimidation by fellow prisoners); and a final stage of abandoning the past and becoming a productive worker, there are also narratives that violate this pattern to varying degrees. There are prisoner autobiographies—although rare—in which there is no admission of guilt and no particular praise of the Soviet system. One such example is the autobiography of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Polokhin, a criminal who practiced the seasonal work of stealing motorcycles and bicycles for three years before switching to thieving on railroad cars.

Polokhin seems to take pride in his criminal life; he describes his various non-legal professions with flair, explaining precisely the details of his criminal maneuverings. He has the criminal nickname “Tashkent,” and he moves to various cities before finally being caught stealing a large sum of money and sent to Povenets, where part of the Belomorkanal construction is located. Included in his narrative is no allegiance to the Soviet state, no description of re-forging, but rather only his success in securing false documents. With these documents, he goes into the city of Povenets every day instead of working at the camp site and attempts to continue his former vocation, this time stealing from suitcases. He is well-dressed and well-fed for being in a prison camp, and he asserts that he does not lack anything. He claims the authorities are often entirely unapprised of the activities at the camp, in a stunning description of the administrative organization:

The monitor and company apparently did not know who and how many people they had, and where to find these people. They are either sleeping or working. In short, an extremely advantageous situation was created for loafers and pretenders.

The loafers went wherever they pleased, especially those who were the smartest.

But it wasn't even necessary to be particularly smart. And so I hung around for more than a month, but in the end I got sick of the idle life.³⁸⁹

It is utter boredom—and not a shock-worker mentality or allegiance to the Soviet state—that ultimately pushes Polokhin to form a work collective called “The Pathway to Socialism” (*Put' k sotsializmu*), a name that seems incongruous with Polokhin's laziness and distaste for work. Despite Polokhin's indifferent attitude, the all-important component of pathway remains, demonstrating how essential this element was in cultural narratives regarding the Canal. Utopian texts and travel narratives are directly related, and the trope of the road is essential to both; in order to describe a fantastical, alternate reality or a literal one, you must explain how to arrive there. Even biographies that seem to violate the norm, therefore, still contain important ideological motifs central to the Canal's construction.

Rather than mere disinterest or boredom, other prisoners criticize the regime for its lack of fairness. Iosima Korneevich Zhitkov claims that he received fewer privileges than his friend—who had worked less than he—did. He goes on to assert that the recent atmosphere on the Canal was negative because the Party was not strong enough. Cryptically, he says, “But that is all I can write,” giving the reader a sense that there is more criticism he would like to air (the unexplained ellipses in his text also allude to this possibility), but he is simply not free to.³⁹⁰ Yet despite these criticisms, the prisoner is clearly not anti-Soviet, and actually wishes the Party organization and control could be stronger.

³⁸⁹ «Староста и ротный очевидно не знают, кто и сколько у них есть людей и где эти люди находятся. Спят или работают. Словом обстановка для лодырей и симулянтов создалась самая благоприятная. Филонь гулял как кому нравилось особенно те, кто по умнее. Да особого ума не требовалось. Так я болтался больше месяца, наконец мне праздная жизнь надоела.» RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 221.

³⁹⁰ «Относительно продовольствия было хорошо и плохо. Сразу п..., но туда было плохо, а потом было...Последнее время было плохо потому что партии не хватало. Ну и все что я мог написать.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 112.

Although not as long or descriptive as Polokhin's text, other prisoner autobiographies also refute the supposed transformational potential of *perekovka*. The prisoner Fedor Alekseevich Tupikov declares in his text that he is not guilty and had never committed any crime. Although he claims he learned many things in prison, including how to read, he swears no allegiance to the Belomorkanal project. He says he has always behaved well in prison, but there is no mention of *udarnichestvo*, and although he writes that he would like to become part of the workers' family he again insists on his innocence in any wrongdoing.³⁹¹ Although not claiming innocence, others use their autobiographies to point out shortcomings on the Canal: "dampness in the barracks, the wind blowing through cracks, even no place to dry your foot wrappings on occasion," and only since they were young and their "blood is boiling" could they withstand such conditions.³⁹² Others cite the initial lack of any cultural life whatsoever, although its eventual development allows prisoners to read newspapers and even gossip about potential counter-revolutionary plots:

All of this work went on in very difficult conditions, there was no cultural life and not even any promises of it. The club corner was just beginning to be built [...] So I started to go to the [reading] corner, where they had some books, magazines, newspapers. I was especially interested in questions concerning the international situation, because in our division and camp there were gossips, and an out-and-out counter-revolution spread around rumors that Japan had taken the Baikal and now there is supposedly some secret council or congress that is discussing something. I looked upon all this with suspicion, and I wanted to report it, but I didn't see

³⁹¹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 38, l. 304.

³⁹² «Сырость в бараке, нередко дул ветер через щели, даже бывало портянок негде было высушить [...] кровь кипит.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 19.

such power to whom to report; despite the fact that I'm in the camps of the OGPU, at our work point the KVCh³⁹³ worked weakly. The whole time I met educators from the newspaper only twice, arguing at meetings, but they did not lead a conversation among the company. And they whispered in different ways. All of this annoyed me, and I often broke in with protests, and they answered me, so, you need more, you're probably a communist. I did not hide the latter, I told them everything that was said about Baikal and Japan was a lie. After a while such incidents did not occur.³⁹⁴

This passage illuminates several different aspects of life at the Canal, including hardship, gossip, and the attempt to self-aggrandize, most likely in the interest of protecting oneself politically. First of all, this passage's author, Abram Gavrilovich Bessonov,³⁹⁵ seems unabashed in his criticism of cultural life at the Canal; although it did exist, it is not as productive or thorough as other prisoners may make it out to seem. In addition, Bessonov acknowledges the

³⁹³ This is an acronym for the *Kul'turno-vospitatel'naia chast'*, or cultural-educational division, which is an organizational sub-division of the KVO, or *Kul'turno-vospitatel'nyi otдел*, or cultural-educational department.

³⁹⁴ «Вся эта работа происходит в очень трудных условиях, нет культурной жизни и нет даже никаких посулов. Уголок для клуба только что начинал строиться и с сентября кое-как функционировать. Тут я стал ходить в уголок, где была кое-какая литература, журналы, газеты. Меня особенно интересовали вопросы международного положения, т. к. у нас в роте и в лагерях были шептуны, махровая контрреволюция разносила слухи, что Япония забрала Байкал и сейчас якобы идет какой-то тайный совет, съезд, который что-то обсуждает. На все это я смотрел с подозрением, так хотелось кому-то заявить, но такой силы не вижу, несмотря на то, что нахожусь в лагерях ОГПУ. КВЧ на нашем пункте работает слабо. За все время я встретил два раза воспитателей торугающих газетой [sic] на собраниях, но бесед среди рот не велось. А шипели на разные лады. Все это нервировало меня, я часто выступал протестами, а мне отвечали: а тебе что – больше надо, наверно коммунист. Последнего я не скрывал, заявлял, что все, что говорится про Байкал и Японию, забрала его – это ложь. Через некоторое время в роте таких явлений не стало.» GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 25.

³⁹⁵ This last name, literally meaning “sleepless” in Russian, could very well be a pseudonym. This seems all the more likely given his potentially controversial narrative about life at the Canal. His choice of surnames, if it is indeed assumed, relates back to the earlier discussion of sleep and dreams on the Canal, the lack of which caused constant difficulties and the presence of which assured an escape from the harsh reality of camp life.

existence of gossip and whisperers at the Canal³⁹⁶ as well as the ideological and moral pressure to squeal on those who do not fall into line, even when no one is looking or paying attention. In many ways, his narrative is quite contradictory; at once wanting to fall in love with Soviet power even as he is not being treated properly, simultaneously interested in international news and gossip and trying to refute it. The end to his story, nevertheless, is a “happy” one—he himself becomes a *vospitatel'* and helps to publish wall newspapers. Although Tupikov and Bessonov both offer criticism of the Soviet regime, they ultimately still would like to become members of its utopian reality.

2.3.4 Political Prisoner Autobiographies: Dmitrii Likhachev, Lev Losev, Nikolai

Antsiferov, and Dmitrii Vitkovskii

Now that the patterns of the criminal autobiographies have been assessed and the key motifs of *put'*, women-specific issues, the “working family,” and the importance of the life narrative have been outlined as elements subsumed by the notion of utopian subjectivity, it is time to compare these texts with memoirs of political prisoners. The conversion narratives of criminal prisoners often glorify shock-labor and the Canal project in the most grandiose terms, fostering doubt as to the sincerity of such statements. One of the most important reasons for reading political prisoners’ memoirs alongside the criminal autobiographies is to see that certain criminals did genuinely align themselves with the administration, whether to secure privileges or for other,

³⁹⁶ The prisoner Iurii Margolin, who served time at the White Sea-Baltic Canal after its completion, also notes the impossibility of keeping secrets in prison: «В лагере нет ни одиночества, ни возможности охранить надолго секреты.» Margolin, 139.

more personal and unknowable, reasons. It is possible to ascertain this fact precisely because the political prisoners complain in their memoirs about the irritating enthusiasm of some prisoners for the Canal project, affirming that such positive sentiments did exist, or at least were proclaimed, at the camp site.

In contrast to the criminals who produced aesthetic works specifically for the administration, the political prisoners often used the unusual atmosphere of the prison camp to advance their personal creative projects. Although the parameters of their artistic and cultural participation may have been different, the political prisoners' memoirs corroborate the criminal prisoners' texts more than one might expect. On the one hand, political and criminal prisoners necessarily had quite different experiences at the construction site. While the latter group was eligible for all sorts of privileges and was targeted in the literacy and cultural campaigns, the former group experienced restrictions on participating in work collectives, longer term sentences, and more severe punishments for wrongdoing committed once in prison. Despite these core differences, the two groups interacted to a much greater degree than they would at later Gulag camps. In addition, both groups participated in artistic endeavors at the camp site—albeit in different ways—in order to alleviate the difficulty of the camp experience.

The famous scholar Dmitrii Likhachev began working as a prisoner at the White Sea-Baltic Canal in November 1931, where he held, as he describes it, one of the most responsible of all positions—railroad dispatcher. The exposure to a diverse group of people and the particular environment of the prison camp actually had a positive effect on Likhachev, and he poetically narrates his experience in his memoirs:

From this scrape I came out with a new understanding of life and a new spiritual state. Those kind deeds that I managed to do towards hundreds of adolescents,

preserving their lives, and towards a lot of other people, and the kindness with which I was treated by my fellow campmates, the experience of everything I've seen very deeply ingrained in me some sort of peace and spiritual health. I did not cause harm, I did not approve of harm, I managed to make life observations about myself and even inconspicuously carried out my scholarly work.³⁹⁷

While not ideological or state-sanctioned, Likhachev does undergo his own type of re-forging in prison, demonstrating how incarceration can represent a revolutionary force in an individual life. Likhachev, as an intellectual and religious believer, couches his experience in philosophical terms. Concentrating on the forces of good and evil—elements that dominate the prison experience—he is proud to acknowledge that not only did he not commit any evil, but he also helped to do good, yet his insistence on not committing any harm also perhaps alludes to concern about appearing as a non-collaborationist.

Like Likhachev, the Belomorkanal prisoner and trained philosopher Aleksei Losev also found a way to continue his intellectual projects within the confines of prison, where he taught his cellmates about aesthetics, logic, dialectics, and philosophy, because, as he wrote about himself, “I cannot live without ideas and scholarship.”³⁹⁸ Despite problems with his eyes and a near-constant pain in his head, he felt a continuous urge to write. Although he described the living conditions as difficult and could not tolerate the regime, Losev also mentioned the surprisingly abundant food (explaining that the prisoners were fed well because they were expected to produce shock labor) and the high quality of the library and reading room, which

³⁹⁷ «Из всей этой передраги я вышел с новым знанием жизни и с новым душевным состоянием. То добро, которое мне удалось сделать сотням подростков, сохранив им жизнь, да и многим другим людям, добро, полученное от самих сокамерников, опыт всего виденного создали во мне какое-то очень глубоко залегшее во мне спокойствие и душевное здоровье. Я не проносил зла, не одобрял зла, сумел выработать в себе жизненную наблюдательность и даже смог незаметно вести научную работу.» Dmitrii Likhachev, *Ia vospominaiu* (Moscow: Progress, 1991), 84.

³⁹⁸ «Не могу жить без мысли и без науки.» Losev, *Radost' na veki*, 13.

allowed him to continue his philosophical work.³⁹⁹ The philosopher's primary concern was making possible a reunion with his spouse, and his correspondence contains many touching love letters between husband and wife. His wife also found an escape route from prison via cultural activity, although she chose to draw rather than to write, as she explained to her husband in a letter from 8 July 1932: "You know, my little dove, I want to to draw, to draw with paints. [...] Little dove, I want to express myself in art. I have kept quiet about so much, living through it internally, all of it was sublimated into something else, and now I want to express myself violently."⁴⁰⁰ Given the irrevocable imprisonment of the body, artistic and mental pursuits offer a psychological escape and bring solace while incarcerated.

Just as the criminal prisoners employed their life stories as material for fictional tales, so Losev used his experiences at the White Sea-Baltic Canal as fodder for a short story. The prevailing documentary aesthetic of the early 1930s—a trend that continued to grow and develop with the evolution of socialist realism—blurred the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, and Losev's own fictional and non-fictional works have remarkable similarities. Losev's short story, entitled "From a Conversation at the Belomor Construction," (*Iz razgovora na Belomorstroe*, 1932-33) narrates a discussion that supposedly took place on 1 May 1933,⁴⁰¹ the first day of rest after a final push to finish the Canal's construction. A group of prisoners assembles to discuss the role of technology, but their conversation drifts onto many topics, most often political ones, including: anarchy, class, the role of Stalin in the Canal's construction, the competition between America and the Soviet Union, and the relationship between history and

³⁹⁹ Losev, *Radost' na veki*, 115.

⁴⁰⁰ «Знаешь, голубушка, а мне хочется писать картины, красками писать. [...] Голубушка, хочется выразить себя в искусстве. Так много молчалось и переживалось внутри, что оно все сублимировалось во что-то иное, хочется себя выразить бурно.» Losev, *Radost' na veki*, 123.

⁴⁰¹ Significantly, this day is also May Day, which further augments the ideological charge of the story.

nature. Interestingly, the prisoner-characters do not complain much about being imprisoned; instead, they define life itself as a struggle for survival, with incarceration as simply an extreme example of the fight for existence. One political topic that causes more controversy than others concerns relating the Belomorkanal regime to the country as a whole; one prisoner claims that if submission here is compulsory, could not this metaphor be extended to apply to the entire Soviet Union? This astute observation—also one of the arguments of the present research—causes controversy among the prisoners, many of whom want to defend Soviet power without necessarily condoning prison camps.

Similar to the more official-sounding fictional narratives, this story also contains traces of *perekovka*. When they announce the topic for their discussion as construction or technology, some are unsure if they are referring only to the Canal, since they are also rebuilding themselves.⁴⁰² Although most of the characters appear to be intellectuals, there are also shock-workers who are fiercely proud of their contribution to Soviet progress; a proud *udarnik* at one point scorns the people gathered together, claiming they just sit in the archives while he is actually working, and he throws his shock-worker record book at one of the guests in attendance when the latter tries to make the assertion that communism deifies technology. The narrator, on the other hand, insists that communism simply uses technology as a means to an end, and that there is no other country in the world where a person can be “re-built” like they can be in the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most poetic, urgent, and epic defense of Soviet power and its capacity for the transformation of human beings comes from the character Abramov:

It’s always been hard for man to live, in history there have never been any happy times. But the fire of creation has always seethed in man, the fire of self-sacrifice

⁴⁰² Losev, *Zhizn', povesti, rasskazy, pis'ma*, 300-01.

and delight, and thus also of happiness and bliss. [...] We, as workers at the Belomorstoi, know how a giant construction can fascinate you, how fantastic technical tasks have turned us from petty-bourgeoisie into heroes and introduced us to universal-historical human creativity. The revolutionary lava swirls, bubbles, and rages. Worlds collapse before us in complete obscurity, and out of it new worlds are born. Birth and death converge until they are completely indistinguishable. Grief and pleasure, delight and tears, love and hate—bubble in our souls, in our country. We perish in this fiery chaos in order to be resurrected from it with new senses and unprecedented ideas.⁴⁰³

In this passage, the transformation of both people and the entire world is described in violent, aggressive terms: the verb *klokotat'* (to bubble or seethe) alone appears three times. The idea of “revolutionary lava” bubbling also underscores the industrial component in the creation of the Soviet Union, with the country like a giant production smithy. Losev’s fascinating short story covers nearly all philosophical aspects of the Canal’s construction from varying viewpoints and on diverging topics: the “tragedy” of Soviet history, production as the outside “objective reality of human individuality,” the “aesthetics of technology,” “Soviet Platonism” as a potential utopia, the role of hard labor, the loss of family ties, and the sense of competition and resentment between those who believe in the reformatory power of hard labor and the Soviet Union and those who do not.

⁴⁰³ «Всегда человеку трудно жилось, никогда не было в истории счастливых времен. Но всегда в человеке клокотал огонь творчества, самопожертвования, восторга, а значит, и счастья, блаженства. [...] Мы, работники Беломорстроя, знаем, как может увлекать огромное строительство, как сказочные технические задачи сделали нас из мещан героями и приобщили к всемирно-историческому человеческому творчеству. Клубится, клокочет и бушует революционная лава. Перед нами рушатся миры в сплошную туманность, и из нее рождаются новые. Рождение и смерть слились до полной неразличимости. Скорбь и наслаждение, восторг и слезы, любовь и ненависть – клокочут в наших душах, в нашей стране. Мы гибнем в этом хаосе, чтобы воскреснуть из него с новомыслиями и небывалыми идеями.» Losev, *Zhizn'. Povesti, rasskazy, pis'ma*, 358-59.

In both his non-fictional memoirs and his fictional short story, Losev discusses the ideological concept of *perekovka*. The philosopher's preoccupation with what is a very Soviet notion does not go unnoticed by other prisoners. The historian Nikolai Pavlovich Antsiferov recalls hearing a philosophical lecture by Losev at the Belomorkanal in which the latter applies notions of re-forging to his intellectual work. Antsiferov offers mild criticism of Losev, claiming that his recent work has been affected to an extreme degree: "How Aleksei Fedorovich [Losev] has changed, been 're-forged,' judging by his recent works!"⁴⁰⁴ Antsiferov also discusses the different categories of prisoners in his reminiscences, claiming that there are three main groups: those who think only of their term and when it will expire, those who are "gold-diggers" and merely want to impress the administration, and those who genuinely believe in their work.⁴⁰⁵ Interestingly, Antsiferov actually identifies the first group as the smallest in number. The historian would fall into the third category, since he takes genuine pleasure in his occupation as a geologist in the Belomorkanal museum, noting that this work is non-ideological and therefore safe. This acknowledgment brings to mind the popularity of geology as a field of study in the 1950s-70s in the Soviet Union, precisely for the reason of its non-controversiality.

In addition to Losev's philosophical lectures, Antsiferov attends poetry readings by the well-known camp poet Smirenskii, literary discussions with A. S. Petrovskii, a presentation on Chinese culture, and he hears the rehearsal of an opera through the barracks wall (*Plotina no. 6* by Igor' Veiss).⁴⁰⁶ The historian even recalls seeing a circus-like performance in which a prisoner dressed up as half-man, half-woman entertains the camp's population. Most

⁴⁰⁴ N. P. Antsiferov, "Iz dum o bylom," excerpt in Losev, *Radost' na vekhi*, 199.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 197.

⁴⁰⁶ Although perhaps entirely coincidental, it is hard not to notice the similarity between the title of this opera, *Dam Nr. 6* (*Plotina no. 6*) and Anton Chekhov's short story about a doctor working in an insane asylum, "Ward Nr. 6," ("Palata no. 6").

importantly, however, Antsiferov remembers a performance—which he rather liked—of the play *Mister Stupid and the Shock-Workers of BelBaltLag*, discussed in the beginning of this chapter.⁴⁰⁷ With the play’s re-appearance here, the inter-connected nature of the cultural arena at the White Sea-Baltic Canal has come full circle. On the one hand, Antsiferov describes the prison (in the much-coined phrase) as a “pathway to life” (*putevka v zhizn’*), but he also registers his dissatisfaction with certain elements of camp life, most emphatically the circulation of gossip and lies.⁴⁰⁸ Antsiferov takes issue with the fact that the *History of the Construction* describes the museum as being open “night and day” (it was not) and that other prisoners spread falsehoods about his past.

Of all the political prisoners discussed here, Dmitrii Vitkovskii has the sharpest and most sarcastic tone in his memoirs. Unlike Dvorzhetskii, Losev, or Antsiferov, Vitkovskii did not have the opportunity to work in something even moderately associated with his former profession of chemist; instead, he toils as a laborer on the eighteenth lock. Vitkovskii, therefore, likely has more interaction with the general prisoner population, whose composition he describes as one third Kulaks and two thirds criminal prisoners. While the former group is reliable, the latter group, according to Vitkovskii, is volatile and impulsive. They do not want to work, constantly talk about how hungry they are, drink vodka and play cards. Vitkovskii discusses the dangerous atmosphere at the camp site claiming that “prisoners, especially thieves, love risk,” mentioning the frequency of unexpected explosions at the work site as most likely due to the antics of the criminal prisoners.⁴⁰⁹ According to Vitkovskii, the thieves seem to have almost

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 198.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 200. Also see the earlier discussion of a potential conspiracy between Japan and the Soviet Union for another example of gossip and lies circulating within the camp confines.

⁴⁰⁹ «Заклученный, особенно блатной, любит риск.» Dmitri Vitkovskii, “Polzhizni,” *Znamia* 6 (1991): 107-16, 110.

complete control over the camp environment. As discussed earlier, they are most often the *vospitateli* since their articles of punishment allow for such a position, but their efforts at “re-education” hardly seem sufficient: “Usually the educators (*vospitateli*) withdraw into an attic in some or another barrack, play cards, eventually manage to get drunk and enjoy various thieves’ amusements.”⁴¹⁰ Afterwards, these supposedly enlightened leaders make up figures for their work reports, corroborating the claim of ubiquitous *tufta* (padding of production numbers) at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Nevertheless, Vitkovskii claims, there are some good *vospitateli* who do their job and are useful because they help to control some of the more unruly criminal prisoners.

This cannot be said of the administration, who the former chemist describes as at best dry and colorless and at worst threatening and abusive. It is often the prison administrators who demand the strictest allegiance to the construction project; Vitkovskii remembers the story of one administrator Uspenskii who receives a short, merely symbolic prison term for accomplishing the “feat” (*podvig*) of killing his priest-father, thereby swearing his dedication to the anti-religious Soviet ethos. Uspenskii went from prisoner to guard at Solovki and is so enamored with prison life that he stays on voluntarily, eventually going to the Belomorkanal. Again, as an enthusiast for the regime, he demands that the prisoners not only work, but “chirp” (*chirikali*) i.e., work with excitement while talking about their dedication to the project.⁴¹¹ Other administrators represent a more serious threat, like the official Iakovlev. He orders Vitkovskii to give him “expertise” (i.e., rat out other prisoners) and when Vitkovskii refuses, Iakovlev continuously asks him day and night, eventually threatening to accuse him of counter-

⁴¹⁰ «Обычно воспитатели уединяются на чердаке какого-нибудь барака, играют в карты, по мере удаи выпивают и развлекаются иными блатными удовольствиями.» Vitkovskii, “Polzhizni,” 110.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 111.

revolutionary activity. Vitkovskii never gives in, but finally offers a threat of his own, telling Iakovlev that he will report him to the head department official, which finally makes Iakovlev discontinue his harassment.⁴¹²

For Vitkovskii, this type of persecution by way of “public opinion” (*obshchestvennost'*) is the worst aspect of camp life, and the former chemist’s description of the phenomenon demonstrates that life at the prison worked somewhat like the oppressive political atmosphere outside of the Gulag. Vitkovskii makes a more direct comparison of the “inside” vs. “outside” when he speculates that the concept of moral necessity is doubtful in prison because it is also in question outside of the Gulag.⁴¹³ In the social order at the work camp, prisoners listen carefully for others’ political mistakes so as to create opportunities for their own self-advancement. At camp meetings such squealers demand the over-fulfillment of the plan and expose other convicts in long-winded speeches, leading to term extensions for many unfortunate prisoners.⁴¹⁴ Yet some defy the threat represented by stool pigeons lurking everywhere; one such example is the technical machine-builder Grisha Kostiukov—sentenced to ten years in prison and separated from his young wife—who looks directly at Vitkovskii and says, “Don’t expect enthusiasm from me. I am not a canary who is going to chirp in its cage.”⁴¹⁵ In light of the incentives given to prisoners for reporting incidents of non-loyalty, it is surprising that Kostiukov is brave enough to make such a statement. Yet despite his non-enthusiasm, he is a very diligent and attentive worker and treats everyone fairly. This takes us back to the fictional epigraph that opens this chapter; in Solzhenitsyn’s *Ivan Denisovich*, Shukhov works assiduously even if he might not “believe” in the regime. He toils carefully in creating his wall not because he is fulfilling an

⁴¹² Vitkovskii, “Polzhizni,” 112.

⁴¹³ Ibid, 108.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ «Не ожидай от меня энтузиазма. Я не канарейка, чтобы чирикать в клетке.» Ibid.

order, but because it gives him a sense of pride and purpose in the otherwise miserable realm of the Gulag camp. In a prison environment, it is necessary to hold onto something that makes you human, to keep some sort of purpose or task in your life; otherwise, it is too easy to slip into oblivion.

2.3.5 Press, Performance, and Page: A Summary

The similarities between the experiences of political and criminal prisoners at the Belomorkanal echo the consistency between the categories of Press, Performance, and Page in which key tropes are repeated in varying ways: the importance of sound and music of labor, the “romantic” love for the construction project, re-forging and the life narrative as conversion story, avant-garde aesthetics, women’s issues, the workers’ family, and the notion of *put’*. Yet despite these consistencies in terms of content, the forms of the works discussed in this chapter vary greatly. While the style or format of these texts exemplifies the “avant,” the content and its recurring themes demonstrate the “realism” in the notion of avant-realism. The three categories in this chapter, in turn, generally represent three tendencies: Press addresses the documentary moment in the Soviet Union and the realist appeal; Performance demonstrates the important role the avant-garde aesthetic and the legacy of the criminal prisoners; Page combines these trajectories in discussing criminal and intelligentsia biographies that contain both realist and avant-garde characteristics. Avant-garde and realist elements, however, exist at least to some degree in all three sections, and all sections, in the interest of thoroughness, include discussions of texts that violate the norm as established by that particular category.

Turning again to the poet Kruchenykh, it becomes evident that his enumeration of the key characteristics of futurism relate directly to artworks produced at the Canal: there is a plethora of

sound and rhythmic patterns (in the poetry, short stories, and daily life on the Canal), structure based on shift (the idea of *put'* and the transformative life narrative), and gaudy metaphorism (as in the overstated romantic love for the Canal and the idea of *perekovka* itself). Despite these qualities, as well as the presence of at least two futurists as key cultural producers at the Canal (Terent'ev and Alymov) and the presence of an avant-garde, criminal aesthetic, the artistic world of the Canal simultaneously forecasts the coming of socialist realism. Complete and devoted service to the state, the *vospitatel'* as mentor, the re-forged prisoner as positive hero, ubiquitous propaganda, and the importance of goal-oriented ideological education all indicate such a shift. Assumptions one might make of a prison camp are easily violated: there was more disorder and less control over the prisoners than one might imagine, there was more enthusiasm and dedication to the project than some readers might think, and there was often more art and culture than one might presume to find in a prison camp. The various and diverse media, motifs, and people at work on the Canal formed both a collage and an assemblage, various bits that eventually coalesced into an oddly-shaped, yet strangely consistent, whole that is ultimately utopia (or dystopia). The Belomorkanal was not just a prison—nor was it simply a metaphorical university, a factory, or a country—it was an idealized and impossible alternate reality, a fantastical space envisioned by the Soviet regime and articulated by Soviet culture where individuality is dissolved through the performance of collectivized, idealized subjectivity.

3.0 NON-PRISONER NARRATIVES

You love, Maksimych [Gor'kii], / Man and labor,
And we / Through labor / Become men!
[...]
We extract the iron ore / The most valuable
Ore / In the world:
Love for man / Is love for labor!
—Sergei Alymov, *Perekovka*⁴¹⁶

Give me a map; then let me see how much
Is left for me to conquer all the world...
—Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*⁴¹⁷

In Nikolai Pogodin's play *The Aristocrats* (*Aristokraty*, 1936), set on the banks of the Belomorkanal construction project, the irascible and cunning criminal main character Kostia exclaims, "And, speaking generally, if a thief can't paint life, then it's better for him to go and be a dentist."⁴¹⁸ Just as it is important for the hardened bandit to imagine life brilliantly, so do the non-prisoner texts under discussion in this chapter often try to coat the Belomorkanal experience in a vivid varnish, one that may not always represent reality but is pleasing to the senses—visually impressive, comically performed, or emotionally poignant.

⁴¹⁶ «Ты любишь, Максимыч, / Человека и труд, / А мы / Через труд / В человеки выходим! [...] Добываем руду, / Самую драгоценную / Из руд / На свете / Любовь к человеку – / Любовь к труду!» *Perekovka* 91 (10 October 1932).

⁴¹⁷ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, Part II, V. iii. 123-24.

⁴¹⁸ «И вообще, если вор не умеет рисовать жизнь, то лучше ему стать зубным врачом.» Nikolai Pogodin, *Aristokraty* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1936), 59. This and subsequent English translations based on Wixley and Carr 1937: 261, with modifications by the author. The Russian edition of *Aristokraty* used throughout is the original publication from 1934, found in the National Library in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Yet despite their authorship by non-prisoners, the texts under discussion in this chapter exhibit a surprising degree of similarity to the prisoner narratives, thereby suggesting the holistic nature of the propaganda machine at work on the White Sea-Baltic Canal. The non-prisoner texts exemplify a diversity of medium but consistency of content. Collective historical writing, film, photography, theater, poetry, and even tourist guides combine their efforts in preaching the doctrine of *perekovka* and praising the glory of Soviet labor, often more emphatically than the prisoner-written materials.

This chapter, therefore, will be divided into three sub-divisions, loosely based on medium: Sketch, Stage, and Screen. Once again, these categories will not be mutually exclusive of one another and an individual artist can be placed at the forefront of each category as its most visible representative. The figure for the first category of Sketch—Maksim Gor'kii—also serves as an emblematic persona for the chapter as a whole, necessitating an introductory section on his life, career, and relationship to the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

Maksim Gor'kii and the Belomor Project: The Poetics of Labor

Maksim Gor'kii, with his interest in labor, collective projects, pedagogical reform, the common man, biography, and romantic realism, represents a metaphorical emblem for the Canal project as a whole. The magnitude of his presence in the Soviet literary sphere augmented his ability to become a spokesperson for a variety of matters in the cultural arena.⁴¹⁹ Paradoxically,

419 Gor'kii's final return to the Soviet Union in 1929 from his second home in Sorrento, Italy was accompanied by much fanfare and celebration: he was given an art nouveau mansion by Stalin; celebrated with jubilees; and one of the main streets in Moscow (Tverskaia) was named after him as well as the city of his birth, Nizhnii Novgorod. Periodicals of the time lavished him with praise; the April 1932 issue of the monthly magazine *Thirty Days (30 dnei)* made such grandiose claims as: "Gor'kii's life is a fight for the cause of the working class," "We believe in Gor'kii!" "Gor'kii is closer and dearer to us than any other contemporary writers," and "Gor'kii is always with us." «Жизнь Горького – борьба за дело рабочего класса,» «Мы верим Горькому!» «Горький ближе и дороже нам, чем любой из современных писателей,» «Горький всегда с нами,» 4-5.

however, Gor'kii only visited the Canal once for a very brief period of time, and his presence was barely noticeable at the Gulag project.⁴²⁰ While this may seem at odds with the assertion of his importance to the Canal, it is crucial to remember that his significance is largely a symbolic one. Similar to Stalin himself, such grandiose figures were panoptical overseers and omnipotent motivators for the work conducted at BelBaltLag. Their near-invisibility actually could have augmented the aura of their ubiquitous yet undetectable presence. Although Stalin visited the Canal only once (and was not even that impressed, making the passing remark that the waterway looked too shallow),⁴²¹ the construction project was named in his honor. Although Gor'kii did not even travel to the Canal with the writers' brigade on their research trip for the *History of the Construction* monograph, he became the eventual editor of the volume and one of the only contributors to pen chapters individually.⁴²² These flagrant paradoxes exhibit how absurdity is part and parcel of the Canal project, like its very own locks and dams.

Interpreters of Maksim Gor'kii's career often express astonishment at the writer's involvement with and condoning of prison camps at Solovki and the Belomorkanal.⁴²³ How is it possible, they wonder, for the "great interceder"—the humanitarian who fought for the rights of women, Jews, and the destitute; who created committees to improve the living conditions of scholars and preserve the monuments of Russia—to give his stamp of approval to such horrific projects, which counted among its victims some tens of thousands of innocent individuals? For many, the disparity seems irreconcilable, and some speculate that either Gor'kii was ignorant of the full extent of Stalin's butchery or that he was aware, but was in a position of necessary

⁴²⁰ In his memoirs, the theater director and prisoner Vatslav Dvorzhetskii recalls how Gor'kii saw virtually nothing on his visit, not even visiting the highly important cultural institution of the camp's theater. Dvorzhetskii, 82.

⁴²¹ Cynthia Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: U Florida P, 1998), 12-13.

⁴²² Mikhail Zoshchenko was the only other contributor to the volume that had an individually-authored chapter.

⁴²³ Tovah Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 227.

acquiescence to safeguard his well-being.⁴²⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn offers perhaps the most scathing critique of Gor'kii in his *Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag GULag*, 1973), which includes a tale about Gor'kii's visit to Solovki. Solzhenitsyn blames Gor'kii for the death of a young boy who dared to tell the outside visitor the truth about the prison.⁴²⁵ Apparently, Gor'kii listened to the horrific treatment of the prisoners, but offered neither to rescue the little boy nor to criticize the overall project. He instead acknowledged it as a grand success in the journal *Our Achievements* (*Nashi dostizheniia*)⁴²⁶ and subsequently joined forces with other prominent Soviet writers and *nachal'niki* to document the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal.

While there is much speculation as to Gor'kii's coercion in such projects, few propose the idea—as I do here—that Gor'kii genuinely believed in the work going on at these camps, despite the violence and brutality he surmised. Gor'kii likely viewed such violence as an unfortunate but ultimately beneficial component of *perekovka*. In his individually-authored chapters of the collectively-written “history” of the Belomorkanal, *History of the Construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal* (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal: istoriia stroitel'stva*, 1934), Gor'kii configures the transformation of prisoners in extremely violent terms: “I am fighting not in order to kill, as the bourgeoisie does, but in order to resurrect the working humanity for a new life, and I kill when there is no longer the possibility to exterminate man's ancient habit of feeding off of the flesh and blood of people.”⁴²⁷

The idea of killing someone if he is not transformable does not represent an aberration in Gor'kii's career; instead, it continues his personal approach to spiritual transformation. He sees

⁴²⁴ Irwin Weil, *Gorky: His Literary Development and Influence on Soviet Intellectual Life* (NY: Random House, 1966), 166.

⁴²⁵ Solzhenitsyn, 60-61.

⁴²⁶ Maksim Gor'kii, *Nashi dostizheniia* (Moscow: Zhurnalnoe-gazetnoe ob'edinenie, 1929).

⁴²⁷ «Я борюсь не для того, чтоб убить, как это делает буржуазия, а для того, чтоб воскресить трудовое человечество к новой жизни, я убиваю только тогда, когда уже нет возможности вытравить из человека его древнюю привычку питаться плотью и кровью людей.» Averbakh et al, eds., 12.

human flesh as raw material that can be worked like any other, even if it proves more difficult; again, in one of his individually-authored chapters of the *History of the Construction*: “Human raw material is processed immeasurably more difficultly than wood, stone, metal.”⁴²⁸ This type of language echoes a letter Gor’kii sends to the author Boris Polevoi in January of 1928 in which the former critiques the latter’s language, claiming that “just as a lathe worker shapes wood or metal, the literary man must know his material, language and words.”⁴²⁹ Gor’kii sees people and language alike in the framework of craftsmanship, and perhaps his mistake is not so much his general support of the Gulag projects, but his genuine belief that human flesh can be formed like words on a page or cement in a factory.⁴³⁰

The Belomorkanal project gives the writer an opportunity to explore further two of his central and long-standing intellectual preoccupations—biography and labor—in the laboratory-type setting of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. These preoccupations, along with Gor’kii’s unique history and forceful personality, explain his enthusiasm for Gulag projects and his relative “success” in Stalin’s time as compared to other Soviet authors. Tellingly, Gor’kii expresses interest in Canal-building nearly fifteen years before the White Sea Canal’s construction began in 1931. In an April 1917 issue of his journal *New Life* (*Novaia zhizn'*), he justifies the use of hard labor to build industry: “Imagine, for example, that it is necessary for us Russians, in the interest of the development of our industry, to dredge a canal from Riga to Kherson in order to connect the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea...and there, instead of sending to slaughter millions of people, we will send just part of them to do this work that is necessary for the country and all its

⁴²⁸ «Человеческое сырье обрабатывается неизмеримо труднее, чем дерево, камень, металл.» Ibid, 609.

⁴²⁹ qtd., Weil 116.

⁴³⁰ In addition, Gor’kii’s early stories, like “Chelkash,” demonstrate the author’s acceptance of cruelty as but a normal part of life.

people.”⁴³¹ It is ironic, of course, that the eventual shipment of people to conduct a similar project does end with mass death, although the slaughter Gor'kii is referring to here is in reference to World War I, against Russia's continued involvement in the conflict. The writer's involvement with the Belomorkanal and endorsement of forced labor does not seem unusual in light of such statements; he approved of this type of project long before the arrival of Stalin.

From the very outset of his writing career, Gor'kii was preoccupied with biography, and this interest found a strong resonance in the literary project of the Belomorkanal. Many of Gor'kii's first short stories have individuals' names as their titles and document the worldview of that particular person: “Makar Chudra” (1892), “Starukha Izergil” (1898), “Chelkash” (1898), and the same holds true for his novels: *Foma Godeev* (1899), *Zhizn' Matveia Kozhemiakina* (1910-11) and the unfinished *Zhizn' Klima Samgina* (1925). Gor'kii pens his own life story when he publishes his autobiography as a trilogy (an identical format to Lev Tolstoi's autobiography) composed of the parts *Childhood* (*Detstvo*, 1913), *Among People* (*V liudakh*, 1916) and *My Universities* (*Moi universitety*, 1922).⁴³²

Gor'kii often blurs the boundary between fiction and reality in both his creative writing and life writing. Scholarship has shown that important aspects of the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy are fabricated,⁴³³ perhaps in an effort to create a myth about his origins that would outlive his physical life. In a way, Gor'kii almost becomes his biography; it seems nearly impossible to speak about the author without mentioning his humble beginnings, or as

⁴³¹ «Представьте, например, что нам, русским, нужно, в интересах развития нашей промышленности, прорыть Риго-Херсонский канал, чтобы соединить Балтийское море с Черным...и вот, вместо того, чтобы посылать на убой миллионы людей, мы посылаем часть их на эту работу, нужную стране, всему ее народу.» Maksim Gor'kii, *Nesvoevremennye mysli*, Paris: Éditions de la Seine, 1971, 28.

⁴³² Konstantin Aksakov's autobiographical *Family Chronicle* also contains three parts and even Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*—largely credited as the first autobiography—consists of two parts, with the author alluding to a third, unfinished part.

⁴³³ Barry Scherr, “Gor'kij's Childhood: The Autobiography as Fiction,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 23 (1979): 333-45.

Evgenii Zamiatin describes him, he is the man “with a big heart and a big biography.”⁴³⁴ It is specifically Gor'kii's mythic biography that is meant to inspire others in downtrodden positions, whether it is wayward orphans or hardened criminals.

In addition, Gor'kii uses the space of his autobiography to document his love of storytelling—a habit he acquired from his illiterate grandmother—as well as to explain the impetus of his humanitarian concerns, since the hardships he endured in his childhood supposedly gave him a particular sensitivity to the plight of human beings. A different example of Gor'kii's life-writing, his volume *Fragments from My Diary* (*Zametki iz dnevnika*, 1924), resembles fiction more than reality, since the pieces read like creative stories and do not have the sequential organization and factual content that a diary would. And the reverse holds true: Gor'kii's fictional works frequently document the author's real-life experiences. The writer acknowledges that the material for his first short stories come from his wanderings around Russia, and he claims he learned to write because he “had so many impressions that it was not possible for me [him] not to write.”⁴³⁵

Another important theme for Maksim Gor'kii's work—labor—finds an outlet in the Belomorkanal project. In his 1928 essay “On How I Learned to Write” (*O tom, kak ia uchilsia pisat'*), Gor'kii not only proclaims his interest in human labor but also links it to creativity: “The history of human work and creation is much more interesting and significant than the history of man.”⁴³⁶ Gor'kii believes that everything comes from and resides in man and that the fruits of his labor are also beautiful. Yet work should not be repetitive or boring; work should

⁴³⁴ «с большим сердцем и с большой биографией.» Evgenii Zamiatin, *Litsa* (NY: Mezhdunarodnoe literaturnoe sodruzhestvo, 1967), 83.

⁴³⁵ «У меня было так много впечатлений, что не писать я не мог.» Maksim Gor'kii, “O tom, kak ia uchilsia pisat',” 133.

⁴³⁶ «История человеческого труда и творчества гораздо интереснее и значительнее истории человека.» Ibid, 128.

supplement and enhance a person's existence, and, most importantly, make him into a better person. Six years later, Gor'kii opens his key address to the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers by claiming that labor processes have never been sufficiently studied, and that these topics are so important because they are directly related to creativity.⁴³⁷ Gor'kii believes that the hands must teach the head and that the head should not be torn from the earth, as it was when manual and intellectual labor separated from each other,⁴³⁸ and he asserts that the most successful and memorable types of heroes come from folklore, the oral creation of the working people.

Even during the time of the revolution, when Gor'kii was undeniably a fiercely independent political thinker, he proclaimed the value of work: "Only in the love of work will we achieve the grand goal of life."⁴³⁹ He acknowledges, however, that work must be made enjoyable: "We relate to work as if it is the curse of our life, because we do not understand the grand sense of work and so we can't love it."⁴⁴⁰ If a person's relationship to work could be changed, the world could become a new place, and the transformation of the person's attitude is perhaps even more important than the quality of the work itself. Gor'kii holds the controversial opinion that Russians are inherently lazy, that they are formed of "two souls," one Western and one Asiatic, and that the eastern component is responsible for the intrinsically sluggish aspect in Russian people.

While Gor'kii later tries to retract such ideas somewhat, they appear repeatedly in his work: "The Russian people—as a result of its historical development—is an enormous flaccid

⁴³⁷ Maksim Gor'kii, "Sovetskaia literatura," *Doklad na Pervom vsesoiuznom s'ezde sovetskikh pisatelei 17 avgusta 1934 goda. O literature* (Moscow: Gos. izdat. khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1961), 416-44, 416-17.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 421.

⁴³⁹ «Только в любви к труду мы достигнем великой цели жизни.» *Nesvoevremennye mysli*, 61.

⁴⁴⁰ «Мы относимся к труду так, точно он проклятие нашей жизни, потому что не понимаем великого смысла труда, не можем любить его.» Ibid, 60.

body, devoid of taste for government-building and practically unreceptive to the influence of ideas.”⁴⁴¹ Gor’kii continues to blame Russia’s spinelessness, anarchism, and innate laziness on the Eastern influence, claiming that evil, slave-like blood still courses through their veins, due to the Tatar inheritance.⁴⁴² Such assertions are highly inflammatory, since Gor’kii is both championing Western ideas and proclaiming that there is something inherently, genetically wrong with Russians. Gor’kii’s admiration of a strong work ethic also seems to explain his esteem for the Jewish people, who he claims are almost always better workers than Russians. The horrible scourge of anti-Semitism in Russia, as Gor’kii asserts, is caused by jealousy, because Russians cannot work as hard as the Jews.⁴⁴³ In one of the most difficult moments of the writer’s life—the death of his son in May 1934—Gor’kii pours himself into his work as the only possible way of forgetting, as his colleague and friend Valentina Khodasevich recalls: “Aleksii always worked a lot, but now, gritting his teeth, he fulfilled, created, wrote, taught, educated, organized, fought, showed, achieved, not considering his own undermined strength, or perhaps, in defiance of it, in order to forget.”⁴⁴⁴

Given the evidence of Gor’kii’s personal interest in biography and labor, it is possible to see how his involvement in the Belomorkanal served as a continuation of ideas he had long been exploring. Gor’kii was not necessarily forced to participate in such a project in order to garner approval from Stalin; he took part because he thought it was a worthy endeavor. This type of attitude perhaps explains Gor’kii’s relative success as compared to other writers in Stalin’s

⁴⁴¹ «Русский народ, – в силу условий своего исторического развития, – огромное дряблѣе тело, лишѣнное вкуса к государственному строительству и почти недоступное влиянию идей.» Ibid, 164.

⁴⁴² Ibid, 198.

⁴⁴³ *Nesvoevremennye mysli*, 248–49.

⁴⁴⁴ «Алексей всегда много работал, но теперь он, стиснув зубы, выполнял, творил, писал, поучал, воспитывал, организовывал, спорил, доказывал, добивался, не считаясь со своими подорванными силами, а может быть, и наперекор им, чтобы забыться.» Valentina Khodasevich, “Takim ia znala Gor’kogo,” *Novyi mir* 3 (1968): 11–66, 60.

Russia. In addition, his personality was so large and fame so great that he was able to sway opinion and command power that nearly no one else had in the Soviet Union. Early on, Gor'kii declared himself a political heretic, belonging to no parties but his own; despite his friendship with Lenin, he was not afraid to criticize him in the most brazen of terms in 1917: "This unavoidable tragedy does not bother Lenin, slave to dogma and his underlings, his slaves. Life, in all of its complexity, is not known to Lenin, he does not know the masses; he has not lived among them."⁴⁴⁵ It was precisely Gor'kii's authenticity—he had lived with the people and became idolized as "our Maksim" (*nash Maksim*)⁴⁴⁶—that allowed him to voice such strong opinions. With his booming personality and presence, literary fame, and romantic yet difficult biography, he had become an icon, a mass-culture hero among a newly literate audience⁴⁴⁷ and an ideal cultural representative for the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction. With Gor'kii's life and career as a metaphorical backdrop, it is now possible to turn specifically to the non-prisoner texts that the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal generated in the categories of Sketch, Stage, and Screen. Like a red thread, Gor'kii's ideals and influence can be traced through nearly all of these documents.

⁴⁴⁵ «Это неизбежная трагедия не смущает Ленина, раба догмы и его приспешников – его рабов. Жизнь, во всей ее сложности, не ведома Ленину, он не знает народной массы, не жил с ней.» *Nesvoevremennye*, 113.

⁴⁴⁶ Petrov Skitalets, *Povesti i rasskazy. Vospominaniia*, Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1960, 285.

⁴⁴⁷ Mary Louise Loe, "Maksim Gor'kii and the Sreda Circle: 1899-1905," *Slavic Review* 44 (1985): 49-66, 51.

3.1 SKETCH

3.1.1 History of the Construction as Utopian Travel Sketch

The most significant non-prisoner narrative concerning the construction of the Belomorkanal is undoubtedly the *History of the Construction of Stalin's White Baltic Sea Canal (Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni Stalina: Istoriia stroitel'stva*, 1934), the testament of the Canal project collectively written by such prominent Soviet authors as Leopol'd Averbakh, Maksim Gor'kii, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Vera Inber, Valentin Kataev, and Viktor Shklovskii. Some scholars go as far to define it as a blueprint for Soviet society more generally: "It is possible to call the Belomorkanal book an encyclopedia of Soviet society during the period of the 'great turning point,' the first half of the 1930s."⁴⁴⁸ Despite the comparison of the monograph to a reference work as well as the inclusion of the word "history" in its title, the volume is anything but a straightforward account of the Canal project. Nevertheless, it does attempt to document the construction in all of its aspects, making gestures at truth-telling by emphasizing the individual biographies of Canal prisoners as well as the physical characteristics of Karelia. The reader is trapped between the realms of fact and fiction with this unusual and propagandistic tome, its content a collage of various pieced-together texts: official orders, prisoner menus, maps, dialogues, photographs, songs, telegrams, addresses, newspaper fragments, and stories are all contained in its pages.

⁴⁴⁸ «Книгу Беломорканал можно назвать энциклопедией советского общества эпохи великого перелома, первой половины 30-х годов.» Mikhail Geller, *Kontsetratsionyi mir i sovetskaia literatura* (Moscow: MIK, 1996), 134.

Expanding upon Marina Balina's argument for the volume as a travel narrative,⁴⁴⁹ I would like to assign the text to the category of sketch, or *ocherk*. Like a travel narrative, the highly popular Russian *ocherk* blends fiction and reality. The sketch, developed prominently in the nineteenth century by writers like Nikolai Nekrasov, became the dominant literary form during the first Five-Year Plan and so exercises a particular importance during the time period of the construction of the Canal.⁴⁵⁰ Although a primary feature of the *ocherk* is the representation and analysis of facts, fictional elements play an important organizational role.⁴⁵¹ This type of literature of fact—in which reality can easily be embellished—is adept at lending credibility to enthusiasm for the Canal project and in turn serves as an ideal propaganda mechanism. Although the sketch would typically be much shorter than the lengthy *History of the Construction*, it is possible to interpret the volume as many different sketches cobbled together in order to create one extended travel narrative. Travel writing was important more generally in this particular moment in Soviet history, since most writers in the country—as part of the striving towards “brigade creativity”—found themselves on the road. From 1931-1933, precisely the years in which the Canal was built, it seemed as if only the leaders of RAPP remained in Moscow; all other writers were on “endless trips.”⁴⁵²

The plurality of material employed in the sketch genre is typically unified by the presence of a first-person narrator. Gor'kii, as one of the few writers to pen chapters individually in the *History of the Construction* and as the editor of the “History of Factories and Plants” series itself, could be understood as a metaphorical, omniscient narrator. The traditional narrator of the

⁴⁴⁹ Marina Balina, “Literatura putesthestvii,” *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, Eds. Hans Giunter and Evgenii Dobrenko (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 902.

⁴⁵⁰ Harriet Bourland, *Soviet Literary Theory and Practice during the First Five-Year Plan 1928-1932* (NY: King's Crown Press, 1950), 62.

⁴⁵¹ Ray J. Parrott, Jr., “Questions of Art, Fact, and Genre in Mikhail Prishvin,” *Slavic Review* 3 (1997): 465-74. 469.

⁴⁵² Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer*, 365.

sketch, who often represents the author himself, typically does not develop or change, but rather simply documents the people and places around him. This approach stems from the idea that a rational, scientific manner can be used in understanding human beings, with detailed, factual descriptions meant to assist in the comprehension of characters.

Russian travel writing has always differed from its European counterpart, stressing more of a documentary quality than a personal, epistolary one.⁴⁵³ The genre stems from the *ocherk*, promoted by Peter the Great as a way of documenting and highlighting various regions in Russia. The traveler in Peter's time was both a private citizen exploring unknown territory and an official representative of the state, with the socialist-realist tradition stemming from this latter prototype.⁴⁵⁴ The classic travel chronotope is designed to make what is foreign more accessible, with its comparison between the familiar and the strange, the old and the new, inviting ideological commentary.⁴⁵⁵ In addition, the travel sketch as developed in the 1930s highlights the struggle between man and time as well as the conflict between man and nature.⁴⁵⁶ Travel sketches can follow two types of narrative paths: linear, i.e., following the road; and local, describing a particular place and its customs. Since the linear model tends to be more abstract and philosophical, it is the second, localized type that garnered much attention in the 1930s.⁴⁵⁷ All of these features of the travel narrative—a linear trajectory following the metaphorical path of *perekovka*, the tension between the foreign and familiar by way of geographical description, the battle with nature, and the struggle with time—are omnipresent in the *History of the Construction*.

⁴⁵³ Balina, "Literatura puteshestvii," 896.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 898.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 900.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

The phenomenon of *perekovka* is a type of pathway that is similar to the road journeyed in travel narratives. As discussed in Chapter Two, in order to achieve *perekovka*, you must tell the story of who you “were” in order to distinguish it from the person you came to “be,” offering a linear trajectory of transformation. Such stories abound: there are the biographies of engineers Voler'ianovich, Maslov, and Zhuk; there are the narratives of criminal men such as Volkov and Rottenberg and criminal women, including Iurtseva and Pavlova;⁴⁵⁸ there are even histories of the *nachal'niki*, including Frenkel', Rapoport, Kogan, and Firin.⁴⁵⁹ Such a preoccupation with the life story also occurs in the book *People of the Stalingrad Tractor Factory* (*Liudi Stalingradskogo Traktornogo*, 1934), the first volume in the “History of Factories and Plants” (*Istoriia fabrik i zavodov*) series⁴⁶⁰ that Gor'kii created. Gor'kii notes the importance of such biographies in the introduction to this book, claiming that they give a sense of the diversity of people who worked at the tractor factory:

All of them are not literati but they were able to write their own autobiographies so that I, a writer and reader, could understand how the *natsmen* Terkul-Khan learns to work at a difficult mill; how the red partisan Galushkin cries from pleasure because the factory has begun working; how Khloptunova instructs girls inculcating in them a good husbandry of mills.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁸ Averbakh et al, 85-86, 111, 125, 494-524, 342, 467.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, 324, 166, 173, 366.

⁴⁶⁰ This series, established by official decree in October 1931, was meant to include documentary volumes on various worksites including construction projects, railroads and, of course, Canals, although the series was never completed in its entirety as originally planned. Gor'kii, as editor and overseer of the project, was very enthusiastic about its ideals and wrote frequently in praise of the series. Gor'kii also saw the series as an ideal way to train new Soviet writers; See Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 370-73.

⁴⁶¹ «Все они – не литераторы, но им удалось написать свои автобиографии так, что я, литератор и читатель, вижу как учится работать на сложном станке нацмен Теркул-Хан, как плачет от радости, что завод начал работать, красный партизан Галушкин, вижу, как Хлоптунова обучает девиц, воспитывая в них бережливость к станкам.» П'ин, 9.

Here the tension between fiction and reality is exemplified—on the one hand, the idea that a factory worker would cry from delight about his workplace opening seems improbable; on the other hand, the presence of specific proper names and detailed information like ethnic background and political persuasion lends the passage a veneer of truth.

The biographical mode so prevalent in the *History of the Construction* underscores the centrality of *perekovka* as a trope, and re-forging, in turn, is meant to have a pedagogical-ideological function, whereby other prisoners can learn how to become productive Soviet citizens through the internalization of “inspirational” criminal biographies. The *ocherk* as a genre also lends itself to socio-political agitation,⁴⁶² making it an ideal format for re-forging narratives. Biographies can also be used politically for an opposite purpose—to weed out class enemies,⁴⁶³ in a project of life writing that is similar to the Soviet phenomenon of self-criticism (*samokritika*). Yet if the act of writing is equivalent to power, as Michel Foucault would argue,⁴⁶⁴ there is something potentially dangerous about giving criminal prisoners a narrative voice at the camp site. Perhaps this at least partially explains why the *History of the Construction* was banned just a short three years after its initial publication; subsequent Gulag publications, if created at all, are devoid of such individual stories. This trend of depersonalization also occurs in the development of Gulag newspapers. Although the paper *Perekovka* repeatedly highlights the participation of convict *lagkory* and includes signed articles and literary contributions by camp inmates, later Gulag publications entirely avoid this type of individuation. In this intermediary period of “avant-realism,” the content of works is highly ideological, but it has not yet become homogenized into a generic, anonymous master narrative.

⁴⁶² Parrott, 471.

⁴⁶³ Katerina Clark, “The History of Factories as a Factory of History,” 261.

⁴⁶⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Trans. and ed. Colin Gordon (NY: Pantheon, 1980).

The exposition of various personalities in the *History of the Construction* demonstrates how people can be created and constructed, either like a piece of art or the building of the Canal itself, since “the birth of the canal goes along with the birth of man.”⁴⁶⁵ This combined aesthetic-technological connotation in the re-forging of prisoners brings to mind the futurist concept of “life-building,” or *zhiznestroenie*; at the Canal, “the new man was created” (*tvoritsia novyi chelovek*).⁴⁶⁶ Likened to the pages of a book, a person is changed irrevocably: “Prisons changed the internal contents of people.”⁴⁶⁷ This birth of new people, in turn, is accompanied by the birth of a new language⁴⁶⁸ and the birth of the Canal, since it is “as if Karelia itself was born along with the Canal.”⁴⁶⁹ When there is a need for certain trades or specialties, these people will be created at the camp site alongside the project of *perekovka*: “You say that there are no cement makers here? This is true. But there are also no honest Soviet citizens here, so we must create both cement makers and honest Soviet citizens.”⁴⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, the repeated emphasis on *rozhdenie* (birth) renders the Canal’s construction organic, making an assault on nature appear to be a natural phenomenon.

While re-forging tales represent metaphorical travel narratives (the prisoners move on a fixed path, or *put'*, from the criminal underworld to a realm of enlightenment), traveling also occurs in a literal but imaginary sense; the authors “visit” capitalist countries in order to describe the awful penal conditions there. Contrasts are drawn between the Soviet project and American slavery, the railroads of Japan, and the prison conditions in Europe (including England, Spain,

⁴⁶⁵ «...рождение канала и вместе с ним рождение человека,» Averbakh et al, 161.

⁴⁶⁶ Averbakh et al, 342.

⁴⁶⁷ «Лагерь изменили внутреннее содержание людей.» Averbakh et al, 582.

⁴⁶⁸ For example, the new word *kanaloarmeets*, or Canal army soldier, is reportedly created during the Canal project. Averbakh et al, 209.

⁴⁶⁹ «Как будто так и родилась Карелия с каналом,» Averbakh et al, 542.

⁴⁷⁰ «Вы говорите, что здесь нет бетонщиков? Правильно. Но здесь нет и честных советских граждан, мы должны создать и бетонщиков и честных советских граждан.» Averbakh et al, 177.

Italy and Germany, and Poland).⁴⁷¹ The project is likened to the erection of pyramids in Egypt,⁴⁷² casting the construction in epic terms. In addition to this geographical diversity, the local physical landscape of Karelia is described in great detail. The difficulty in completing the project is underscored by the wild, difficult nature of a region filled with water and rock, a landscape that is so quiet that it seems “the world had not yet been born” there.⁴⁷³

The emphasis on the map in the *History of the Construction* comprises another important element of the geographical thrust in the volume, a feature that is present in many of the other non-prisoner narratives to be discussed in this chapter. The volume opens with a diagram of the White Sea-Baltic Canal entitled “schematic map” (*skhematicheskaiia karta*) and ends with a diagram of the Moscow-Volga Canal, demonstrating how the Soviet project of transmogrifying nature will continue to be carried out in the future, recreating additional landscapes. The potential for changing the map under the revolutionizing agency of socialist power is particularly highlighted:

There is an incredible connectedness in our new map. We see how one part of it strives for another, and then they are connected: the Urals and the Kuzbass, Siberia and Turkestan. The map of the future classless country must become a whole, like the map of one city. Its dots, marking villages, strive to be transformed into circles. Its dotted lines will become straight lines.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷¹ Averbakh et al, 19-24, 49-52.

⁴⁷² Ibid, 124.

⁴⁷³ «...и всю эту огромную тихость, как будто мир еще не родился...» Ibid, 173.

⁴⁷⁴ «Удивительная связность нашей новой карты. Мы видим, как одна ее часть стремится к другой, и вот – они соединены Урал и Кузбасс, Сибирь и Туркестан. Карта будущей бесклассовой страны должна стать цельной, как план одного города. Ее точки, изображающие поселки, стремятся превратиться в кружки. Ее пункты – в линии.» Ibid, 25.

Just like the diverse prisoner population⁴⁷⁵ is unified into one working mass and the different styles of creative texts⁴⁷⁶ are meant to convey a singular message, so will the different areas of the country itself be pieced together by actively interacting with nature. It is possible to see this geographical project as yet another type of collage—here more like the three-dimensional style of assemblage—in which disparate pieces are connected into a whole. Yet until the prisoners have finished their work, all of these sections of the Canal, “Locks...Dams...Dikes...All of them for now are only on paper!”⁴⁷⁷

In one of his rather rare appearances in the book, Stalin is described as standing in front of a map, pencil in hand, designating how the marshes will be dried out and the landscape will be transformed by way of Soviet labor.⁴⁷⁸ As Iakov Rapoport, assistant director of the Belomorkanal project, gestures to a large diagram of the Canal’s pathway it is again noted that, despite being conceived from “time immemorial” only under socialism could this grandiose project be fulfilled.⁴⁷⁹ These gestures had been echoed by the words of Lev Trotskii a decade earlier in his landmark work *Literature and Revolution* (*Literatura i revoliutsiia*, 1924): “The socialist man wants to and will command nature in all its breadth...He will indicate where the mountains should be, and where they should part. He will change the direction of rivers and will

⁴⁷⁵ In highlighting the varying religions, professions, ethnic backgrounds, and languages among the prisoners at the Canal, the volume points to the great diversity of the camp population.

⁴⁷⁶ The volume contains an incredible amount of narrative styles, including *skaz*, reportage, theatrical, novelistic, direct address of reader, repetition as a device, as well as dramatic shifts in tone, turning abruptly from a short, punctuated style to a more lyrical one, from addressing the general to the specific, and from discussing history to contemporary reality. Part of this great *mélange* of styles may be due to the fact that the book is collectively written; in the end, its style is not homogeneously modified into a seamless whole.

⁴⁷⁷ «Шлюзы...Плотины...Дамбы...Все они еще пока только на бумаге!» Averbakh et al, 181.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 552.

⁴⁷⁹ «Издревле задуманный...» Ibid, 554.

create rules for the oceans.”⁴⁸⁰ Trotskii goes on to explain that such an aggressive relationship with nature will change the composition of man himself:

Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.⁴⁸¹

Exemplifying the auditory theme that has permeated the body of cultural texts included here, Trotskii refers to harmony, rhythm, and music to establish his argument. He does this for reasons similar to the other authors’ insistence on melodic themes—such metaphors aptly capture the notion of a collective body working in harmony, a sonorous orchestra composed of many different instruments. The forms of life, in turn, are to become “dynamically dramatic,” as if life itself were a theatre performance. Trotskii finishes his statement by returning to geography; not only does man change the landscape according to his image (echoing Marx’s “in changing nature, man changes himself” to be discussed below), but he also rises ever higher, like mountain peaks.

In order to achieve this transmogrification of nature, a fierce battle must be fought according to the Soviet trope of “the war against nature.” The *History of the Construction*, therefore, is replete with military diction: people are “collectively organized in the fight against

⁴⁸⁰ «Социалистический человек хочет и будет командовать природой во всем ее объеме... Он укажет, где быть горам, а где расступиться. Изменит направление рек и создаст правила для океанов.» Lev Trotskii, *Literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991), 194. English translation, Evgenii Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories*, Trans. Jesse M. Savage (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP), 2005, 111.

⁴⁸¹ «Человек станет несравненно сильнее, мичнее, голос музыкальнее, формы быта приобретут динамическую театральность. Средний человеческий тип поднимется до уровня Аристотеля, Гете, Маркса. Над этим кряжем будут подниматься новые вершины.» Trotskii, 197. English Translation, Rose Strunsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1970), 256.

the rocky stubbornness of nature,” and they must face “the fight with rock, marsh, and river.”⁴⁸² Water is described as an “enemy” (*vrag*) that must be “trained” (*rastit'*), since every day this foe becomes more and more dangerous,⁴⁸³ and nature itself is “cunning” (*khitraia*),⁴⁸⁴ just like an enemy would be. The outcome of this geographical emphasis and battle with nature is an entirely original, subjugated, and rationalized physical environment: ‘The result of this new science—planning—changed the understanding of geography while also changing the landscape...As it is said in prison, we ‘mastered nature.’”⁴⁸⁵ This trope of war against nature might be traced back to one of the foundational texts of socialist ideology, Karl Marx’s *Capital: A Critique of the Political Economy* (1867), in which the relationship between man and nature is described as one of struggle and dominance:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸² «...коллективно организованы на бой против каменного упорства природы,» «борьбу с камнем, болотом, рекой.» Averbakh et al, 14, 15.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 94.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, 145.

⁴⁸⁵ «В результате новой науки – планирования – изменилось понятие о географии, изменился попутно и ландшафт...Как говорят в лагере, «выучил природу.»» Ibid, 358.

⁴⁸⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Trans. Samuel Moore (NY: International Publishers, 1970), 177.

This connection is clearly made by the editors of the *History of the Construction*, who include the phrase “In changing nature, man changes himself” as a title to a photograph of a stout woman wielding a drill at the construction site.⁴⁸⁷

The notion of harnessing the physical environment according to human will, however, does not begin with Marx—it is actually introduced much earlier by the scientist Francis Bacon, who advocates mastery over nature. Frequently credited as the originator of modern science, Bacon proposed that nature was an external object that had to be manipulated by human hands.⁴⁸⁸ This naturally introduced a connection between industry and the scientific method, an association that is omnipresent in cultural texts related to the Canal. It was not just that the Canal was to be constructed, but also that it was (supposedly) done rationally, with a plan, and according to the latest engineering developments.⁴⁸⁹ One of the most significant technical achievements—and a source of much pride—was the engineer Maslov’s development of all-wooden locks. When he first suggested the idea, others noted with incredulity that no such system existed anywhere in the world and thought his proposal was a joke, yet his design was ultimately accepted, because “genuine space for technology and science is possible only under socialism.”⁴⁹⁰

The Soviet project, therefore, went beyond individual construction sites or new industrial centers; it was intended to recreate all of science, since “under socialism you can work...and not

⁴⁸⁷ Averbakh et al, 318.

⁴⁸⁸ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: U Georgia P, 2008), 3-5.

⁴⁸⁹ Although the feats of technology and science are clearly highlighted in the *History of the Construction*, there is also frequent mention of the project’s many challenges, including difficulties with cement (94), general technical problems (128, 149), the lack of supplies (332), and the endless stream of questions related to how the project would be completed (297). Such an open acknowledgment of the problems occurring during the Canal’s construction, however, is here meant to show how the talent and abilities of Soviet industry were able to complete a project under such dismal conditions.

⁴⁹⁰ «...истинный простор для техники и науки возможен только при социализме.» Averbakh et al, 115.

only work, you can create a new chapter within a new science: socialist hydro-technology.”⁴⁹¹

In this example, the White Sea-Baltic Canal was not just a metaphorical laboratory for new experiments, but also a literal, scientific one. Man, landscape, culture, industry, science—everything was to be remade under the revolutionary power of socialism. Inherent in such a reorganization of our environment is also a certain amount of danger, since people are not only changed by the milieu they have created but also must live within it. The sociologist Robert E. Park remarks upon this phenomenon in the context of urban planning: “Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself. But if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live.”⁴⁹²

Time, the final characteristic on our list of literary devices typical in the travel narrative, is an omnipresent motif in the *History of the Construction* as well as at the worksite itself. The Canal’s construction was an important project in Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, an economic program that defied the boundaries of time, being completed in four, rather than five, years, its name offering an endlessly repeated semantic, mathematical paradox: the title, that includes the number five, is made equal to the time of completion, or the number four. In creating a new science and a new world, straightforward rationality no longer holds true: the Underground Man would finally realize that two and two does not equal four; it equals five.⁴⁹³ This re-definition of time was a source of great pride in the Soviet Union; the slogan “five in four” was ubiquitous, and the motif was included in the *History of the Construction*: “Only the Soviet Union surmounts all difficulties, fulfilling the grand plan of socialist construction—the five-year plan—even

⁴⁹¹ «...при социализме работать можно. И не только работать – можно создать новую главу в новой науке: социалистической гидротехнике.»

⁴⁹² Robert E. Park, *On Social Control and Collective Behavior*, Ed. Ralph H. Turner, Chicago: U Chicago P, 1967.

⁴⁹³ Fedor Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 99-179.

earlier than in four years.”⁴⁹⁴ The emphasis on acceleration formed half of one of the most ubiquitous sayings about the Canal in the *History of the Construction*: that the Canal must be built “quickly and cheaply” (*korotko i deshevo*).⁴⁹⁵ The use of local materials (such as Karelian pine for the wooden locks) and minimal technology was meant to keep down costs, just as work storms and shock-labor were meant to increase work production. Words like “tempo” and “on-time completion” of the Canal are everywhere in both prisoner and non-prisoner works about the Canal, and according to the *History of the Construction*, time is the most important aspect of the project: “For the realization of the project three things are needed: time, time, and once again time.”⁴⁹⁶ Even though the Canal was completed during the projected schedule of twenty months, work on the Canal is often described in the future tense in the monograph, locating the project in an imaginary temporal realm.⁴⁹⁷

The emphasis on a future, undefined time as well as a perennially unfinished landscape strengthens the argument for interpreting the *History of the Construction* not only as a travel narrative but also as a utopian vision. The word utopia comes from the Greek “οὐ τόπος,” literally meaning “no place,” implying the impossibility of such a fantastical realm to exist. In Stalinist culture, the future became the present, creating a sense of hypothetical, utopian time. At the camp site, prisoners were encouraged to sacrifice their bodies and minds in the name of a grandiose and future vision. Utopian texts and travel narratives, in turn, often follow similar paths: both must describe an unknown world, country, or city; the physical landscape of this new place; the route to get there; and the local customs and people inhabiting this milieu.

⁴⁹⁴ «Только Советский союз преодолевает все трудности, выполняет великий план социалистического строительства – пятилетку – даже раньше чем в 4 года.» Averbakh et al, 81.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, 123.

⁴⁹⁶ «Для осуществления проекта нужны три вещи: время, время, и еще раз время.» Ibid, 124.

⁴⁹⁷ Balina, “Literatura puteshestvii,” 904.

The imagined space of utopia has many similarities to the arena of the camp site; utopian space is an imaginary enclave within a real social space as the result of spatial and social separation.⁴⁹⁸ In Thomas More's seminal work *Utopia*, a trench separates the unwanted world from the idealized space of utopia. Such a gesture of separation can quickly turn utopia to dystopia, as with the Green Wall in Evgenii Zamiatin's science fiction masterpiece *We* or with the barbed wire of the Gulag camp. Just as utopias are often imagined as islands, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's dystopian description of the Gulag is presented as an archipelago, or set of many islands. Ultimately, utopian space offers an arena for social experimentation, just like the idea of a laboratory that forms the metaphorical backbone of this research.

Both the laboratory and utopian metaphors in use here make the representation of space an absolutely essential element of the Belomorkanal project, and space is also a crucial element in the imagination of Stalinist culture. As Mikhail Epstein notes, an unusual phenomenon happens in the Soviet chronotope; while time seems to disappear almost entirely, space becomes expansive and uncontainable. This is precisely what occurs in the example of the Belomorkanal. Nature and space are documented in all of their aspects, whereas time is rushed so hurriedly forward it nearly disappears altogether. The physical locality of the project was ultimately more important not only because it offered itself as a utopian laboratory, but also because it promised a physical backdrop for the documentation of socialist grandeur. A slim, official text published in 1933 regarding the Canal's recent construction includes a photograph that aptly demonstrates this point; on the banks of the Canal, there is a large Soviet star, so large that it engulfs a ship sailing through the Canal itself, looking awkward in the barren landscape. Thus the actual,

⁴⁹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 15.

practical purpose of the Canal—to provide a waterway for transportation—is reduced to its ideological purpose—to serve as a physical space for the advertisement of Soviet achievements.

3.1.2 The Literal Travel Narrative: Tourist Guides from the *Belomorkanal*

While utopian texts dwell in the realm of the unrealizable, travel guides potentially assist a real-life experience. How can one comprehend, therefore, literal tourist guides to the fantastical utopia—or dystopia, if you will—of the White Sea-Baltic Canal? The absurdity of such texts mirrors the utopian drive itself. Jameson has suggested that utopian texts have goals that are inherently paradoxical: these works posit the end of history yet want to offer usable historical models; they attempt to resolve all political differences while being deeply political; and they remain materialistic even though the needs of the body are supposedly overcome.⁴⁹⁹ It is incongruous, in turn, to have travel guides—what are essentially advertisements—for the sensitive and secretive arena of the Stalinist Gulag. Yet during the early 1930s, the regime figured the project as a colossal feat of Soviet power and a source of great pride. If we are to understand Stalinist reality as a landscape of the fantastical, as scholars like Evgenii Dobrenko and others would argue, such inconsistencies seem less out of place.⁵⁰⁰ The style of these texts combines a collage format with a totalizing, ideological message—echoing many of the earlier-discussed Belomorkanal works—all while projecting a utopian vision of both the project and the Soviet Union as a whole.

⁴⁹⁹ Jameson, xiv.

⁵⁰⁰ Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: U Washington P, 2003).

“Map-guide” (*Karta-putevoditel'*), was published in 1934, immediately after the Canal’s completion. The small volume consists of generously-sized fold-out maps on thin, tissue-like paper, accompanied by an introductory text. Not surprisingly, the text addresses the alteration of the country in terms of the map and the first Five-Year Plan by quoting Stalin: “Look at the map of the USSR; the Five-Year Plan has re-carved the country’s face.”⁵⁰¹ The introduction posits the White Sea-Baltic Canal as one of the most important socialist achievements in recent years and as a major part of the first Five-Year Plan. Many factors contribute to the Canal’s significance, according to the guide: it creates a long-awaited connection between the Baltic and White Seas; it is longer than both the Suez and Panama Canals; it has “exceptionally great” (*iskliuchitel'no veliko*) transportation significance; it is important to the production strength of Karelia; and the on-time construction of the project in such harsh territory represents an unbelievable technical feat.⁵⁰²

While the text regurgitates the standard, official proclamations about the Canal, the images are somewhat more complicated. The diagrams of the Canal shift from general to more specific, moving from an overview map of the area, including the Ladozhskoe, Onezhskoe, and Beloe Lakes, to a localized image of just the very beginning of the Belomorkanal and its surrounding landscape, to a close-up of the Canal itself. This zoning-in serves both a geographical and pedagogical function; as readers, we are slowly exposed to the landscape and guided to the final locale of the Canal itself. While the text has a straightforward, totalizing message, the images employ photomontage in order to create a fantastic reality, sometimes including the juxtaposition of jarring pictures. The second map in the guide contains two

⁵⁰¹ «Посмотрите на карту СССР, пятилетка перекроила лицо страны. –И. Сталин..» *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal imeni tov. Stalina: Karta-putevoditel'* (Moscow: TsS Osvod, 1934), 1.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

inserted photographs: one of the Karelian forest and another of a leisurely bather. The choices for the photographs are at odds with one another; although the Karelian forest is commonly portrayed in texts about the Belomorkanal in order to document the depth and wildness of the untouched landscape, the bather almost seems like a parody. In the harsh and disorganized landscape at the Canal site, there are certainly no bathing beauties in light-colored swimsuits sunning on the Canal's banks.

The third map in the guide, which focuses directly on the Canal, contains a photomontage of pictures more likely expected: images of locks and dams are inserted along the pathway of the Canal, offering a type of makeshift focusing effect. The use of photomontage in the travel guide to create an idealized reality and isolate various constructive elements of the Canal demonstrates the performative potential of visual images. The image, despite its association with factual documentation, is adept at bringing what is absent into presence.⁵⁰³ The documentary photograph, in turn, “testifies to everything other than what it actually depicts,” since the full story is always much more than the sum of objects included in the image.⁵⁰⁴

Although the miniature, postcard-like book “Foto-turist” (“Photo-Tourist”) of the White Sea-Baltic Canal does not offer any substantial text, it does contain a series of interesting photographs—all of which contain photomontage elements—as a version of a travel guide. The titles of the photographs are typed and inserted, lending a homemade, collage-like feel. While this feature may have simply been a technical necessity for the inclusion of text, the end result of a pieced-together work is still the same. At times it is not just the titles of pictures that are inserted but also other photographs; in the inset of one of the photopgraphs contained in the

⁵⁰³ For example, the case of medieval icons in which a graphic portrayal is meant to represent literally an otherwise unknowable, non-locatable religious figure. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Figure and the Witness: Trauma, Memory, and Visual Culture* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 12.

⁵⁰⁴ Guerin and Hallas, eds., *The Figure and the Witness*, 57.

collection, Lazar' Kogan's head looms above the administrators Semen Firin and Matvei Berman, as if he were guiding them from a physically and intellectually higher vantage point. Yet perhaps the most interesting photo in the whole collection is that of Stalin, Voroshilov, and Kirov sailing through the Canal. Although Genrikh Iagoda, with his easily recognizable pencil-thin moustache, is present in the photograph, he is not included in the title. The photograph eerily echoes the painting by socialist-realist artist Dmitri Nalbandian: here, Stalin and company are sailing through the Canal in an art work that must have been created using these documentary photos. The work was finished in 1937, simultaneously with the declaration of Iagoda as an enemy of the state. Nalbandian, a devout Stalinist, was required to touch up the painting, removing Iagoda altogether and replacing him with a much less substantial—and ideologically neutral—overcoat. The fate of Iagoda represents just one of the many incongruities surrounding the Canal and Stalinist culture itself; like Terent'ev or Firin, he was at one point a much-lauded Canal representative, widely praised and even awarded the Order of Lenin, yet none of these achievements could save him from execution.

Although the 1933 commemorative issue of the oversized, illustrated monthly magazine *The USSR under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*) to the White Sea-Baltic Canal is not a travel guide *per se*, it contains many of its features. The magazine exposes the landscape in a series of photomontages created by the famous photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko and underscores the importance of the map by including artistic diagrams of the waterway as both the front and back covers of the issue. Not just this particular issue but the publication itself serves as a type of guide to the Soviet Union; it is published in German, French, and English editions to showcase to an international audience Soviet grandeur; other magazine issues also systematically document the country like a travel narrative. Topics in 1933 include a tour along the Volga River, a

showcase of the “new culture” of industry, the opening of a tractor factory, and a documentary voyage through Mongolia. These themes demonstrate attempts by the editorial board (headed by the omnipresent Maksim Gor’kii) to showcase both the technological feats of the Soviet Union and its great geographical diversity.

The map images that open and close the Canal’s commemorative issue of *USSR under Construction* are not mere diagrams; instead, they are innovative photomontages that creatively reconfigure the landscape. Photomontage is an adept style for utopian, world-recreating visions—a cruder equivalent to today’s airbrushing, the technique allowed artists to create a landscape that physically did not exist. With his montages, Rodchenko was not as interested in representing the reality of Soviet political life as other photomontage specialists were; instead, he wanted to create “a complex, multilayered world of poetic imagination and private references.”⁵⁰⁵ On the one hand, Rodchenko had removed himself from public debates concerning the social purposes of photomontage,⁵⁰⁶ but on the other hand, his avant-garde sensibilities and *Lef* membership indicated a willingness to collaborate with the state in the shared state/constructivist goal of society’s transformation.⁵⁰⁷

Rodchenko was enthusiastic about the Canal project, even if his excitement was limited to the creative potential he could explore at the camp site; he spent more time on the Canal than did any other outside artist, with estimations running from three months (in English sources)⁵⁰⁸ to nearly two years (in Soviet sources).⁵⁰⁹ He also made a large number of pictures at the Canal,

⁵⁰⁵ Margarita Tupitsyn, “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics: Soviet Practice 1919 through 1937,” *Montage and Modern Life 1919-1942*, Ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 82-127, 88.

⁵⁰⁶ Tupitsyn, 96.

⁵⁰⁷ Groys, 22, 29.

⁵⁰⁸ Erika Wolf, “The Visual Economy of Forced Labor: Alexander Rodchenko and the White Sea-Baltic Canal,” *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, Eds. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 170.

⁵⁰⁹ L. Volkov-Lannit, *Aleksandr Rodchenko risuet, fotografiruet, sporit* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 125.

coming away with more than two thousand negatives, and this work is often thought to be some of his best photography.⁵¹⁰ While some are critical of Rodchenko's role in the documentation of a harsh labor camp, his artistic corpus from the Canal should be seen not as an aberration in his career but rather the exemplification of it, since the ability to transform a Gulag camp into an aesthetic project encapsulates the constructivist impetus to remake the world through photography.⁵¹¹

The predominance of montage in travel narratives about the Belomorkanal becomes clearer with a comparison of the aforementioned texts with a later tourist guide, *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal i zapoliar'e* (1936). The guide was published by the Central Council of the Society of Proletariat Tourism and Excursion (*Tsentral'nyi sovet Obshchestva Proletarskogo Turizma i Ekskursii*), in existence from 1927-1936, placing the publication squarely within the tourist-guide genre. Despite becoming available only a short two years after the other guides discussed here, the work has a much different physical appearance. Gone are the photomontages, the inserted titles, the recreated landscapes; instead, there is a much more straightforward, documentary guide that privileges text over image and includes simple, unembellished photographs as mere factual accompaniments to the surrounding words.

In the end, the White Sea-Baltic Canal represents a kind of dystopian utopia. Thousands of prisoners died for a project that did not turn out as planned. *Perekovka's* success was negligible at best, and the Canal was too shallow to offer any real economic significance. The Belomorkanal, therefore, did not exist as it was intended; it turned out to be a utopia in the negative sense, a "no place" (*ou topos*). If we accept this line of reasoning, what does it mean to

⁵¹⁰ Leah Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda and Dreams: Photographing the 1930s in the USSR and the US* (Zurich: Stemmle, 1999), 65.

⁵¹¹ Wolf, 173.

have a collective history, travel guides, diagrams, and maps of a place that does not actually exist? On the one hand, it is an exercise in the absurd, an oxymoron. On the other hand, it is precisely the type of documentation the Soviet regime would require in order to further its claim of the White Sea-Baltic Canal as a revolutionary, ideological laboratory of socialist ideals. The map is of primary importance in creating this alternate reality, since maps are not “inert records of morphological landscapes or passive reflections of the world of objects” but rather “refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world.”⁵¹² The language of maps, what is chosen for portrayal and what is excluded, and the naming of locales are exercises in writing and power, a cartographic performance for an audience willing to believe in the validity of such documents as truth-tellers.

3.2 STAGE

Construction, Time, and the New Man: Nikolai Pogodin as Playwright

Nikolai Pogodin—the author of *Aristocrats* (*Aristokraty*, 1934), the most famous play concerning the White Sea-Baltic Canal—was a newspaperman before he was a playwright. He worked as a reporter for proletarian-titled publications such as *Trudovaia zhizn'* (*Working Life*), and as a correspondent for well-known Soviet newspapers such as *Pravda* (*Truth*). Many specialists on the playwright's career note how much Pogodin's plays were influenced by this professional experience. He developed his signature writing style while working for *Pravda*,

⁵¹² J. B. Harley, “Maps, Knowledge, and Power,” *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, Eds. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 277-312, 278.

subsequently employing the abbreviated, realistic language characteristic of the press in his dramatic works.⁵¹³ Pogodin identified himself first and foremost as an author within the previously-discussed genre of *ocherk*, with the example of his 1929 play *Tempo* (*Temp*) as a sketch: “I am a sketch artist [...] My play *Tempo* is dramatic sketch with all the features of a sketch. [...] It is truth.”⁵¹⁴ The documentary aesthetic was imperative to Pogodin, who tried to write exclusively on his contemporary reality.

For *Aristocrats*, he supposedly based the character Sonia on a real-life female prisoner named Pavlova, who had told the playwright her life story.⁵¹⁵ Although this reportage style represented a new development for Soviet theater, the content of Pogodin’s plays did not necessarily break with traditional patterns⁵¹⁶: “In terms of form,” writes Rudnitskii, “his first plays were newspaper sketches conscientiously translated into theatrical language. And in terms of content, they develop the classical tradition.”⁵¹⁷ The playwright’s early productions met with much success; *Tempo* was staged more than one hundred times in two years, seen by approximately 120,000 viewers, and greeted with many favorable newspaper reviews.⁵¹⁸ *Aristocrats* was also well-received as a light-hearted comedy and was profitably staged at the Realist Theater (*Realisticheskii Teatr*) in Moscow in 1935; it was declared the best play of the 1934/1935 theater season.⁵¹⁹ It was adapted into a feature film directed by Evgenii Chervikov,

⁵¹³ K. Rudnitskii, *Portrety dramaturgov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1961), 300.

⁵¹⁴ «Я очеркист. [...] «Темп» – это сценический очерк со всеми особенностями очерка... Это – очерк. Это – правда.» Rudnitskii, 298.

⁵¹⁵ Nikolai Zaitsev, *Nikolai Fedorovich Pogodin* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1958), 110. I was unable to locate this individual biography in the GARF or RGALI archival files.

⁵¹⁶ This oppositional style/content divide has been apparent in many of the previously-discussed cultural narratives concerning the Canal, and the disparity occurs in both prisoner and non-prisoner texts.

⁵¹⁷ «Со стороны формы его первые пьесы были газетными очерками, добросовестно переведенными на язык сцены. А со стороны содержания они развивали классические традиции.» Rudnitskii, 319.

⁵¹⁸ Efim Kholodov, *P'esy i gody: Dramaturgiia Nikolaia Pogodina* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1967), 11.

⁵¹⁹ V. Zaleskii, “Sovetskaia p'esa,” *Sovetskii teatr* 1 (1935): 7.

The Prisoners (*Zakliuchennye*, 1936), for which Pogodin wrote the screenplay and Sergei Alymov composed the songs.⁵²⁰

The film largely follows the plot of the play, although it ends differently; in the play, the newly re-forged prisoners simply watch the first ship sailing through the Canal, whereas in the film, the prisoners themselves are riding through the Canal, all cheerily conversing with one another. This difference offers the viewer a collective moment similar to the white-clad, sparking Soviet citizens marching through Red Square at the end of Ivan Pyr'ev's *Circus* (*Tsirk*, 1936). Yet the individual prisoners are not yet a uniform mass; instead, we learn details of their individuality, as when Sonia reveals a picture of her daughter, who is waiting for her mother outside of prison.⁵²¹ The happy chattering of criminals and officials is followed by a close-up of the swirling water in the lock, offering the viewer visual proof that their past lives have indeed been drowned in the depths of the Canal. The film offers a visual representation of the power dynamics at work at the camp site, and the triangulation of characters with portraits or busts that seem to be guiding them—like the invisible Stalin or Gor'kii—are present throughout the film (see Figures 4 and 5).

⁵²⁰ Given the film's similarity to Pogodin's play, it will not be discussed in detail here nor in the Screen section, as the work essentially follows the same story line as *Aristocrats*.

⁵²¹ Although in this example a visual Figure—a photograph—plays a key role, *The Prisoners* often uses written documents as important plot devices, despite belonging to a visual medium: Maksim Gor'kii writes a letter to the official in charge of re-forging Sonia (a detail not in the play); the prisoners read aloud to one another from the *Perekovka* newspaper; Margarita passes Kostia a note about her ignorance of his thieving life; Kostia displays a note to his fellow prisoners that attests to his re-forging and honesty.



Figure 4: The film *The Prisoners* (*Zakliuchennyye*).



Figure 5: The film *The Prisoners* (*Zakliuchennyye*).

In terms of content, Pogodin's theatrical works addressed motifs central to the Belomorkanal project, including industrial construction, time, and the re-birth of man. One Pogodin scholar interprets five of the writer's early plays—*Tempo* (*Temp*, 1929), *Poem about the Axe* (*Poema o topore*, 1931) *My Friend* (*Moi drug*, 1932), *After the Ball* (*Posle bala*, 1934), and *Aristocrats* (*Aristokraty*, 1934)—as a “poem to the Five-Year Plan,” with each play representing part of a five-voiced oratory⁵²² in the name of Soviet industrialization.⁵²³ In most of these plays,

⁵²² Musical metaphors are not only appropriate for Pogodin's body of work as a whole, but they are particularly relevant to his play *Aristocrats* (see the ensuing discussion).

⁵²³ Kholodov, 4.

the reconstruction of man is just as important as the building of industrial projects.⁵²⁴ The ubiquitous Gor'kii was an early supporter of Pogodin's career, and the supposed "father of socialist realism" had much praise for the playwright upon reading a collection of his essays sent to him in Sorrento: "What you are writing about is not simply the external transformation of the old Russian way of life, not just trifles, but rather the profound re-birth of the old Russian man...and this re-birth is achieved with a simply miraculous rapidity."⁵²⁵

The death of the old Russian subject and re-birth of the New Soviet Man (accompanied by an emphasis on time) are arguably the most prominent, recurring themes in all of Pogodin's dramatic works—themes, of course, that are central to the Belomorkanal project. The topic of subjectivity, therefore, and the dramatic creation of the newly re-forged subject, will be the main focus of the present analysis of *Aristocrats*. This subjectivity is mere performance, just as the characters themselves are acting on the stage. None of the re-forging narratives are particularly believable, and some of the more recalcitrant characters in the play quite brazenly disparage the notion of *perekovka*: "There's nothing reformed or reformed about me and all this play-acting isn't worth a god-damn," says the character known simply as the "tattooed woman" (*Tatuirovannaia*);⁵²⁶ see Figure 6 for her jarring visual representation in the film *The Prisoners*. Although she may act as if she is reformed, she acknowledges that it is just a performance.

⁵²⁴ Ibid, 77.

⁵²⁵ «То, о чем Вы пишете, не просто внешние изменения старого русского быта, не мелочи, а глубочайшее перерождение старинного русского человека...Перерождение это совершается с быстротой просто чудесной.» Zaitsev, 10.

⁵²⁶ «Ни черта я не перековалась и плюю на все эти драмы через плечо.» Pogodin, 71. Wixley and Carr, 279.



Figure 6: The character the “tattooed woman” in the film *The Prisoners* (*Zakliuchennye*).

Before depicting the transformations of prisoners, Pogodin gives a colorful and comic portrayal of life at the labor camp, focusing mainly on the criminal prisoners—even the sky is described as “criminal” (*vorovskoe*) in the opening of the play—who sarcastically call themselves “aristocrats.” BelBaltLag appears almost like a raucous playground, where vodka is easily attainable, cocaine is longed for, card games are played in the name of love, thieves recognize old friends from the criminal underworld (for example, the main characters Kostia and Sonia), convicts plot escape, and people of all backgrounds—including religious figures like priests and deacons—intermingle. Nevertheless, both criminal and political prisoners openly acknowledge their disdain for the authorities. The thief Karas' (similar to the name of a real-life prisoner who penned the biography discussed in Chapter Two) notes prophetically: “Ten years in these parts! They don’t kill you outright, but instead offer a slow death over years.”⁵²⁷ The engineer Sadvskii claims: “What, I a builder? I—an enthusiast! Vitia, it’s all padding, a sham, connections, mimicry, my friend!”⁵²⁸ Finally, the Canal is “a whim of the new tyrants. A

⁵²⁷ «Десять лет на такой стороне!.. Не убили тебя сразу, а на года дали длинную смерть.» Nikolai Pogodin, *Aristokraty*, 5. Wixley and Carr, 180.

⁵²⁸ «Я строитель? Я энтузиаст? Витя, это туфта, это липа, это блат, это мимикрия, друг мой!» Pogodin, 28. Wixley and Carr, 214.

senseless gesture.”⁵²⁹ The degree to which various prisoners collude with the authorities serves as a major conflict, with both criminals and politicals disdaining their former friends either for collaborating with officials or, on the opposite extreme, for not participating in the project enthusiastically.

The main character, Kostia or the Captain, (*Kapitan*) is a well-known figure in the criminal world and respected by the other prisoners for his daring and bravado. From packages to cigarette cases to pens, he manages to steal numerous items right from under people’s noses in absurdly comical episodes. Although he is the prisoner most resilient to re-forging, claiming that he will never change, he ultimately swears allegiance to the Canal and hard labor. Sonia, the female main character, accepts the role of worker sooner than Kostia, even if she is also at first very skeptical of the phenomenon of re-forging. Their two journeys to becoming socialist citizens form the foundation of the plot—“both people and the canal must be re-built,”⁵³⁰ as the play claims—while their transformations exemplify the importance of life-writing, the state as substitute family, and the idea of *put’*.

Like with many of the conversions detailed in actual prisoner autobiographies, Sonia’s re-forging is facilitated by dialogue with a camp official. At first, however, their conversations are unconvincing, and Sonia remains one of the most vocal opponents of re-forging, her criticism astute and inflammatory: “It’s all a lie [...] It’s a lie! Re-forging, remaking, education, newspapers [...] Who are they fooling? A prison’s a prison!”⁵³¹ Sonia partially attributes her ability to discern mendacity to the fact that she grew up in an orphanage, an experience that trained her how to be severe with the world. The official who helps her to re-forg herself, in

⁵²⁹ «Барская затея. Бессмысленный жест,» Pogodin, 28. Wixley and Carr, 215.

⁵³⁰ «Перековывать надо...И канал строить надо.» Pogodin, 15. Wixley and Carr, 194.

⁵³¹ «Все это ложь [...] Это – ложь! Перековка, переделка, воспитание, газеты... Кого путают? Тюрьма – значит тюрьма.» Pogodin, 20. Wixley and Carr, 202.

turn, is re-cast in the role of the father—the *nachal'nik* asks specifically what Sonia's father did for a living and compares his father to hers; Tamara, another prisoner, then claims that the official is a spitting image of her dead father as she bursts into tears.

Even if they are initially recalcitrant, the parentless status of the majority of the prisoner-characters eventually makes all of them more susceptible to words of kindness or consideration from authority figures intending to act as parental substitutes. In a later conversation, the official asks Sonia to tell him her life story, including details of the robberies and murders she has committed.⁵³² Although Sonia compares him to a “gramophone” (*grammofon*),⁵³³ constantly repeating that she needs to begin work even as she insists that she never will, she eventually takes a first step in her transformation by agreeing not to drink vodka. Finally, she consents to begin working and to end her criminal ways.

While Sonia's re-forging is a process, occurring only after many discreet conversations with the official, Kostia's transformation is more sudden and therefore even less believable. Kostia's character also has a more slippery sense of selfhood, perhaps justifying his accelerated route to *perekovka*; since he is accustomed to assuming different identities, his identity is malleable and fluid and his “re-forged” persona can be adopted more easily than Sonia's. During his registration at the prison camp, Kostia makes apparent his many personalities: “About this registration—let's see, what name was I tried under? Blium? Ovchinikov? My biography has gotten all mixed up. What kind of questions are these? I'll register myself under my father's name. Kostia Dorokhov.”⁵³⁴ In addition to the previous identities he had in the criminal world, Kostia (who actually goes by the *klichka* “Captain”) adopts different personalities at the actual

⁵³² Pogodin, 27.

⁵³³ Ibid, 29.

⁵³⁴ «Записываться... По какой фамилии меня судили? Блюм? Овчиников? Вся биография перепуталась. Что за вопросы? Запишусь на фамилию своего папы. Костя Дорохов...» Pogodin, 10. Wixley and Carr, 186.

camp site. He pretends to be an engineer, an aviator, and even an electrician in his hilarious efforts to dupe fellow prisoners and officials into procuring items for him. Significantly, when Kostia is eventually re-forged, he finally drops all assumed names and criminal sobriquets: “I ask you to remember—my surname is Dorokhov, my name is Konstantin Konstantinovich. Criminal nicknames are not to be used from this day on. Konstantin Konstantinovich.”⁵³⁵

Other characters in the play also grapple with issues of their subjectivity, sometimes finding it difficult to recognize their friends; the engineer Botkin hesitatingly says to Sadovskii, “I’m so sick, Sadovskii. I knew you, I still know you. No, it is you, Iurka [...] Dear old Iurka, I’ve been living for half a year in emptiness. I don’t see anything before me, I don’t feel time. It’s frightful to live like this.”⁵³⁶ Botkin’s complete disorientation speaks to his presence in a dystopian environment. Since there is no gradation of space and time is eternal, he finds it difficult to recognize even some of his closest friends and colleagues.

Just as important as the transformation of the character-prisoners is the route to their re-fashioning. One prisoner-turned-educator acknowledges that he has “passed through the school of prison,”⁵³⁷ other characters refer to the “pathway to life,”⁵³⁸ and the play ends with a steamship plying the literal route of the newly-opened waterway, as the camp chief Gromov acknowledges its metaphorical counterpart: “Perhaps no one can understand this quite so well and feel so deeply about it as we do, who have trodden the glorious path of the White Sea Canal

⁵³⁵ «Прошу запомнить – моя фамилия Дорохов, зовут меня Константин Константинович. Воровские клички здесь отпадают. (*Лимону*) Константин Константинович.» Pogodin, 64. Wixley and Carr, 268.

⁵³⁶ «Мне так больно, Садовский. Я знал тебя, знаю. Нет, это ты, Юрка... Милый Юрка, я полгода живу в пустоте. Не вижу пространства, не чувствую времени. Страшная штука так жить.» Pogodin, 28. Wixley and Carr, 215.

⁵³⁷ «Прошел эту школу.» Pogodin, 31.

⁵³⁸ «Путевка в жизнь.» Pogodin, 36.

Construction.”⁵³⁹ Instead of the horizontally-oriented and more commonly used notions of *putevka*, *put'*, and *doroga* (start, path, road), the society is likened by Kostia to a ladder, a vertically-oriented metaphor:

The Chekists aren't magicians. Before every man they simply set a ladder and say “Climb it.” The higher you climb, the better life becomes. One rung gives you better boots and clothes, another—better food. Then there is the shock-brigade rung: when you get on that, you forget you're in a prison camp and you're allowed to send for your wife. But there is still a higher rung, when your entire ten-year sentence is cancelled and vanishes like a nightmare after a spree. [...] I know one thing—a secret: if you climb to the very highest rung of the ladder and for some reason or other drop down, that'll really be a terrible fall!⁵⁴⁰

Kostia's metaphor more accurately describes the social divisions at the camp site, and there are other instances in which he astutely defines the administration's ideological goals and methods. After numerous attempts by educators to reform him, Kostia laments: “Again you have come to pick away at my soul,”⁵⁴¹ reflecting the interconnectedness between punishment and the psyche as necessitated by the penal philosophy of *perekovka*.

While the transformational life story serves to strengthen the role of re-forging, the physical act of writing often seems to undermine the validity of *perekovka*—demonstrating,

⁵³⁹ «Никто, может быть, не поймет этого с таким волнением, как мы, прошедшие славный путь Беломорстроя.» Pogodin, 88. Wixley and Carr, 304.

⁵⁴⁰ «Чекисты – не фокусники, они просто перед каждым человеком ставят лестницу и предлагают «Поднимитесь.» Чем выше, тем красивее жизнь. На одной ступеньке вы получаете лучшее обмундирование, потом питание, потом бывает ступень ударности, и вы забываете, что вы сидите в лагере, вам разрешают выписывать жену. Но бывает такая высокая ступень, когда все ваши десять лет зачеркиваются и исчезают, как кошмарный сон с похмелья ... Я знаю еще одну вещь. Секрет. Если вы пойдете до самой высокой ступени и по какой-нибудь причине сковырнетесь оттуда вниз, уверяю вас, это будет очень печальное сальто.» Pogodin, 58-59. Wixley and Carr, 260-61.

⁵⁴¹ «Опять вы пришли царапать мою душу.» Pogodin, 43. Wixley and Carr, 237.

perhaps, that it is possible to perform, but not to document, subjectivity. Kostia steals Sadovskii's pen, making it impossible for the engineer to write down his crimes as a wrecker, something he had tried to do several times but, as he claims, he "could never get it down on paper straight."⁵⁴² At the end of the play, Sadovskii promises Gromov a written list of his crimes, and the administrator acknowledges the change in Sadovskii with the help of another writing-related metaphor—that a "page" (*stranitsa*) in the engineer's life had clearly been turned, obviating the necessity for him to acknowledge his crimes in writing. In addition to Sadovskii's pen, Kostia is accused of stealing another, more modern writing instrument: a typewriter. The supposed theft causes great controversy among the other prisoners, all of whom had finally believed that Kostia was re-forged and had given up thieving. Even when writing does occur, it is often portrayed as nonsense or a ruse; Sonia claims, "I can't understand the rubbish they write about in the newspapers" and Sonia and Kostia sign papers—before their re-forging—that they will over-fulfill the plan, which they do not take seriously.⁵⁴³

If subjectivity is the grandest performance in *Aristocrats*, music is the medium through which the new utopian ideal of collective selfhood can be expressed. At the end of Act Three, Kostia claims he wants to sing a Hungarian Rhapsody about the marvelous night that had passed, the work they had accomplished, and the potential for human love. The "former" Father Bartholomew follows Kostia's serenade with his musical ensemble's performance of a foxtrot. The dance for which Kostia asks is called Peter the Great (an appropriate choice, since this famous Russian leader represents another empire-builder, reformer, and changer of geography in the northwestern party of the country), and the camp dissolves in the merriment of music and dance. When water rushes through the newly-constructed Canal at the end of the play, it is

⁵⁴² «Я вам несколько раз составлял письма, но выходило не то.» Pogodin, 85. Wixley and Carr, 298.

⁵⁴³ «О том барахле в газетах писать...не понимаю.» Pogodin, 60. Wixley and Carr, 264.

“singing through the locks,”⁵⁴⁴ making it appear as if nature—like the prisoners—is joyfully musical in appreciation of being transformed by socialist labor.

Kostia, an accordion player, not only performs musically, but also uses music in his final, grand metaphor about the magic of re-forging. Before relating song to the camp site itself, he recalls a vivid childhood memory—reinforcing the crucial role of individual autobiography and past experience—of seeing a Jewish boy play the violin in a concert hall as if it were his entire purpose in life. Kostia then moves on to an analogy between this performance and his own that he is about to give on the glories of the Canal:

The rhapsody isn't finished yet, there are still a few notes to be struck, still a few bars out of tune. The Bolsheviks know this very well. To go through the conservatory of life is no easy job, especially for folks like us. Sonya, you're not pleased with my speech, I can see. Sonya, I can't sing a Soviet serenade with a cheap tune now. This serenade of mine has cost a great deal.⁵⁴⁵

The musical metaphor is so apt because it sufficiently describes the unification of many voices into one whole, a collective composed of many individual pieces. The camp chief Gromov notes after Kostia's speech, “Yes, comrades it's true, our destinies have become intermingled and in this intermingling of thousands of lives there is much that is touching.”⁵⁴⁶ The composition of the camp population is diverse: “Sluices, dykes, rocks, dynamite, boulders, marshes, crooks, bandits, wreckers, kulaks, ministers of the Provisional Government, colonels, pickpockets...thousands of them with spades and

⁵⁴⁴ «...поет вода на шлюзах.» Pogodin, 88. Wixley and Carr, 304.

⁵⁴⁵ «Рhapsодия еще не сыграна, и мы не взяли всех нот. Кое-что сорвется. Большевики это отлично знают. Жизнь очень трудная консерватория, в особенности для таких элементов, как мы. Соня, вы недовольны моей речью. Соня, я теперь не могу петь советские серенады по-дешевке. Моя серенада мне очень дорого обошлась.» Pogodin, 88. Wixley and Carr, 302-303.

⁵⁴⁶ «Да, товарищи, наши судьбы переплелись, и в этом сплетении тысяч жизней много трогательно...» Pogodin, 88. Wixley and Carr, 303.

shovels and wheelbarrows and saws—like a battle tonight,”⁵⁴⁷ and therefore some kind of aggregating force is required to bind everyone together in a type of human collage.

Pogodin’s play reiterates many of the tropes associated with the Canal’s construction: war against nature, re-forging as pathway, autobiography as conversion narrative, collage, and music. Although the play was certainly intended to be a positive representation of the Canal project that would popularize its methods, the text actually erodes the legitimacy of re-forging. None of the characters’ transformations are plausible, and their earlier disdain for the regime is so forthright and repetitive that it makes their spontaneous refashioning unbelievable. The play’s success was not because of its adherence to the official party line, nor because of audience appreciation of the lesson of re-forging, but for just the opposite reasons: genuinely funny and supremely colorful, with a broad cast of criminal characters, the play found in those elements the key to its popular success.

3.3 SCREEN

Aleksandr Lemberg’s Documentary Films

Although the aforementioned film *The Prisoners* might be the obvious choice for the Screen section, this work will be set aside here for several reasons. First of all, the movie closely follows the plot of the play from which it takes its screenplay. In addition, a shift from fictional

⁵⁴⁷ «Шлюзы, дамбы, скалы, аммоналы, валуны, пловуны, жулики, бандиты, вредители, кулаки, министры временного правительства, полковники, фармазоны...тысячи с лопатами, с тачками, с запалами – штурмовая ночь.» Pogodin, 68. Wixley and Carr, 274.

to factual materials—here, a discussion of documentary film—will allow us to compare the two. As discussed in Chapter Two, the line between fiction and reality is often blurred in texts regarding the Belomorkanal, and supposedly factual media—like photography or newspapers—can be used in order to fabricate fantastical realities. Aleksandr Lemberg, whose documentary films offer a different approach in narrating the Canal’s history, will be the focal point of the Screen section.

Despite arguments for the non-reliability of the visual image,⁵⁴⁸ documentary film offers the most tangible “proof” thus far for the administration that the Canal was successfully completed and the prisoners effectively re-forged. There is something altogether different—and more powerful—about seeing the ideological tropes of the Canal played out visually, on the big screen.

Lemberg was affiliated with official Party affairs long before he began his work documenting the White Sea-Baltic Canal. He worked as a cameraman on the front lines during World War I; in 1918-1922 he filmed Lenin, eventually becoming responsible for recording the leader’s funeral; in 1919-1920 he worked as a filmmaker on agitational ships and trains (*agitparokhody* and *agitpoezdy*).⁵⁴⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Lemberg would take up the ideologically-charged task of recording one of the great achievements of the first Five-Year Plan. In its ability to prompt the viewer to make particular associations, film as a medium offered new potential for expressing propagandistic themes.

⁵⁴⁸ “For all our reliance on Figures, we never quite believe in their revelations. Despite the privilege given to the authority and presence of the Figure, it is, after all, just a Figure, a picture. It might be manipulated, biased in perspective: it does not fully reveal the truth of what it claims to represent,” Introduction by Guerin and Hallas, *The Figure and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, Eds. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1-2.

⁵⁴⁹ Iutkevich, 232.

As Sergei Eizenshtein would argue, such manipulation of the audience was possible mainly through montage. Rather than understanding film purely as a visual medium, Eizenshtein combined shots—which he defined as hieroglyphs that became intelligible only within a particular context—in order to stimulate the brain physiologically and make the viewer “feel” cinema rather than simply see it.⁵⁵⁰ This stimulation is achieved through the combination of drastically contrasting shots, with the “collision between two tendencies” ultimately intensifying the viewer’s experience.⁵⁵¹ For Eizenshtein, therefore, cinema could never be reduced to individual shots; rather, it was their assembly and their context that made the medium. Film did not just use montage as a technique; film *was* montage.

Montage, according to Eizenshtein, has the ability not just to create new realities but also to act physically upon the viewer, since it “enhances perception from a *melodically emotional colouring to a direct physiological sensation*,” shifting one into what Eizenstein would call the “fourth dimension” of cinema.⁵⁵² This fourth dimension is a type of alternate reality, a realm that does not actually exist, and this radical re-conception of space mirrors the avant-garde experimentation with photomontage as an exercise in creative geography. The discussions of both photomontage and film montage—heated debates in the 1920s and early 1930s—allowed artists to explore the possibility of creating realistic-looking fantasies. Early experimentation with montage is likened by one scholar to a type of total vision or “panoptic,” in which a universal eye akin to Dziga Vertov’s “cine-eye” is capable of capturing the entirety of space simultaneously. Like the all-seeing panopticon of prison discussed in Chapter One, here the “cine-eye sees everything inaccessible to the ordinary eye and is not bound by the old model of

⁵⁵⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1: Writings 1922-34, Ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana UP, 1988), 185-86.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, 190.

⁵⁵² *Ibid*, 191. Emphasis in original.

perception. It allows the new society to free itself from the old canon of representation and to shape a new one along with new body language and new living spaces.”⁵⁵³ The panoptic eye of cinema, therefore, is adept at capturing the pre-determined reality of panoptic life in prison.

Keeping this theoretical explication of montage in mind, Lemberg’s films offer the viewer stunning examples of the technique, and these instances will comprise the core of the formal analysis undertaken here. In terms of content, it is necessary to highlight Lemberg’s reiteration of two of the central tropes concerning the Canal’s construction—the war against nature and the pathway to *perekovka*. Lemberg, in the end, strategically balances content and form. The adeptness of montage for embracing contradictions permits him to present the possibility of a theme transforming into its opposite—for example, the sleepy nature of Karelia into an industrial powerhouse or the wayward criminals into honorable socialist citizens.

Lemberg’s 1934 film *The White Sea-Baltic Waterway* (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Vodnyi Put’*) opens with dramatic, anxious music that eventually flows into a softer, more relaxed melody. The music is mirrored by the succession of shots: first the viewer sees pictures of the Karelian landscape, with intertitles acknowledging its imposing rock and deep forest, a landscape covered with lakes and rivers and crashing waterfalls. Yet in a socialist country, as the film informs us, such waters must be made “navigable” (*sudokhodnymi*). In order to do so, prisoners are brought to the work site beginning in 1931. There is no attempt made by the film to mask the fact that the Canal was built with prison-labor or to make the criminals appear—at least initially—as anything other than lawbreakers. The headshots of several prisoners are shown, making note that the convicts have no education or training but multiple prison sentences. Montage, with its facility for combining opposites, helps to document the miraculous

⁵⁵³ Oksana Bulgakowa, “Spatial Figures in Soviet Cinema of the 1930s,” *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, Eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: U Washington P), 53.

transformation of the prisoners; first we see the original tools of their respective professions—skeleton keys to break into homes, tools to break into safes, brass knuckles to ward off enemies—but then we glimpse their substitutes: saws, shovels, and wheelbarrows. After seeing the literal instruments of their transformation, we travel to the actual worksite, where prisoners frantically use their new tools to cut down forests. The change in nature and change in man occur side-by-side, and one would not be possible without the other.

Some tools in particular are highlighted, such as the “local Ford” (*mestnyi ford*), which is essentially a horse pulling rocks on a cart, very far from the motorized vehicle that is its namesake. No attempt is made to conceal the crude working conditions and homemade tools; instead, these are highlighted almost as a source of pride, as these obstacles had to be overcome in order to complete the construction. In addition, an intertitle makes clear that the locally-made tools allow the camp to be self-sufficient; in difficult economic times, the camp does not need to tax the resources of the plants and factories of the country. This assertion underscores the assessment of the Belomorkanal as laboratory; instead of relying on outside sources, the camp site produces its own, with inventions that are innovational only because of their very elementary design. Shots of logs collected on the water (being readied for use in locks or makeshift roads) and images of rocks that are piled up into dikes and dams allow the viewer to visualize vividly how “nature’s riches” are being re-oriented in order to serve the purposes of man. This reconfiguration is on an epic scale; a comparison is made with Egypt—until then, as the film claims, this country supposedly had the largest water reservoir in the world, yet one that was two times smaller than the one created at the Belomorkanal.

While the first half of the film concentrates on Karelia’s wild landscape and its subsequent transformation, the second half focuses more on the cultural apparatuses at the camp

site—simultaneously highlighting and making equivalent the change in nature with the change in man. Alongside the picks and axes showcased in the beginning of the film, one of the “most important machines” at the Belomorkanal is the printing press, which we see churning out issues of *Perekovka*. The reading room is shown, with its sign listing its working hours as noon to five. The portrayal of an agitational brigade is merry and animated, with its members grinning broadly and playing guitars. They sport identical uniforms with kerchiefs akin to those that young Pioneers would wear.

The brigade has not just a performative function, but also a pedagogical one; as a crude animation demonstrates how a canal works (its locks filling up with water and raising a ship to the next lock, etc.), the members of the performance group mimic the drawing, with different members standing at different heights to represent the Canal and one member holding a drawing of a boat on a stick that he moves through the human waterway. In this sequence, the prisoners figuratively become the Canal—a move that happens literally with the infamous claim that the waterway is built on the bones of its workers. This is also an example of assemblage, a three-dimensional art construction used to convey a singular message. In gathering together to form the route of the Canal as well as the vessel traveling through it, the criminals not only lose their individuality in the name of a collective, but they also subjugate themselves to the artistic expression of an idea. Subjectivity is lost in the shared performance of the utopian dreamland of the Belomorkanal.

In addition to the cultural endeavors at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, like the agitational brigades and newspaper-reading, the cultural *byt*, or everyday life, is also portrayed. We see a prisoner joyfully taking a bath in conditions that are surely ameliorated for the dissemination of what is essentially a propaganda film; we even see a prisoner being examined by a doctor. The

juxtaposition between the pair is jarring—the criminal prisoner, with his large tattoo of an eagle on his chest revealed as he lifts his shirt, offers an odd contrast to the bespectacled physician in a crisp white lab coat. As if the disparity were not already evident, the next shot shows an even closer view of the prisoner’s large tattoo that spreads across his entire chest. The symbol of an eagle in the language of criminal tattoos symbolizes authority within the thieves’ world as well as freedom, sometimes denoting a past attempt at an escape.⁵⁵⁴

Both the change in nature and the change in man are underscored by a cyclical theme in the film. The documentary follows the seasons of the year, highlighting the different challenges faced in winter and spring. In several different shots, the film shows the prisoners walking down a pathway as a group, either across a bridge or simply on a path to the worksite. These shots, when intercut with other shots asserting the prisoners’ transformations and cultural enlightenment, exemplify the idea that the criminals are now following a different path, the route of *perekovka*.

The film ends on a musical note, with an orchestra playing as the laborers put the finishing touches on the final lock. The lock chambers—all composed of precisely aligned wood beams that look almost like graph paper on the screen—appear majestic and grand, especially when seen in scale of the now Lilliputian people who walk on the floors of the rooms. As the lock doors slowly close, the conscious use of montage throughout the film seems to have elicited the desired emotional response; it seems unbelievable that the piles of rocks and logs, the furious work with primitive tools, and the difficult landscape could actually have been transformed into such a neatly articulated finished product.

⁵⁵⁴ Lev Mil’ianenkov, *Po tu storonu zakona: Entsiklopediia prestupnogo mira* (Saint Petersburg: Damy i gospoda, 1992), 14, 183.

Lemberg's 1933 documentary film *Belomorstroi Reports* (*Belomorstroi raportuet*) offers an even more dramatic example of the use of montage to facilitate specific viewer reactions. The film opens with large explosions alternating with intertitles that demand "Listen, Party!" "Listen, Karelia!" and, finally, "Listen, Union!" to the report from the Belomor construction. The large explosions, each growing in magnitude, achieve visually what the intertitles demand textually: our attention is seized. The re-forging of prisoners is highlighted immediately after the evidence of the destruction of nature: "We will not only make the canal, but along with it re-forge the new man in the crucible of creative work."⁵⁵⁵ Similar to the previously discussed film, this assertion of re-forging is followed with various shots of prisoners walking down pathways with the question asked "who are they?" (*kto oni?*). The idea of *put'* or *doroga* is emphasized by the sequence of shots: prisoners are shown walking from behind, from the side, walking down a path along with men on horseback, walking with shovels. With a total of eight separate shots of prisoners walking in different places, there is a sense of forward motion, of traveling, that is instilled in the viewer from this montage of pedestrian performances. The notion of *put'* is emphasized throughout the film, in terms of industry as well as people: a conveyor belt transporting rocks mirrors this forward motion, and several shots of railroad tracks are merged with shots of water help to collapse the notion of a roadway for trains with a waterway for boats.

These eight shots are interspersed with scenic images of Karelia, here bringing the transformation of nature and the transformation of man even closer together than in the previous film. By employing Eisenstein-style montage and juxtaposing two opposites—the active walking of men with the stillness of untouched nature—the two are inextricably linked while also fomenting a particular emotional reaction in the viewer. Under the "firm direction" of the

⁵⁵⁵ «Мы сдадим не только канал...Но вместе с ним перековавшегося в горниле творческого труда нового человека.»

OGPU, this sleepy landscape is transformed and the White and Baltic Seas are connected; even if nature is described as “stubborn,” man “is even more stubborn.” The initial, peaceful shots of the Karelian *paysage* are drastically contrasted with a subsequent series of men “working” on nature: hammering away at rocks, frantically sawing down trees, and deftly wielding jackhammers. Yet this film does not initially highlight individual prisoners in photographs as the first film did; instead, it shows a group of criminals en masse dancing merrily around a toothless accordion player. Although one of the prisoners is shown separately from the group as he narrates how he was re-forged and will never return to his previous criminal life, the administrative officials are the real focus of the film: Genrikh Iagoda, Lazar' Kogan, Iakov Rapoport, Nefteli Frenkel', Nikolai Khrustalev, Matvei Berman, and Semen Firin are all featured in separate shots acknowledging their particular contributions to the Canal project.

As head of the USSR, the most important official is Stalin himself, and this is the only Lemberg film discussed here to include footage of the leader. The impetus to build a canal is attributed to Stalin, and he is shown along with Voroshilov and Kirov making a voyage through the Canal. Appropriately, a nautical metaphor is used to explain Stalin's role in the project: “The Captain of the country of Soviets leads us from victory to victory!” and “With a good captain the ocean is not as frightening!”⁵⁵⁶ This metaphor is very similar to others used to denote Stalin's significance: just as he is the captain steering the vessel of the country, he is the driver of the locomotive of history. The film ends, appropriately, with a close-up of Stalin followed by the setting sun.

The last Lemberg film to be discussed here, *Port of Five Seas* (*Port piati morei*, 1932-33), includes many of the themes already discussed: the battle against nature, the re-forging of

⁵⁵⁶ «Капитан страны Советов ведет нас от победы до победы!» and «С хорошим капитаном не страшен океан!»

criminals, the role of officials and prisoners, the importance of culture, and the difficulty of the project. What is different about this film is that its intertitles are entirely in French, suggesting that the film was produced for a foreign audience. It is necessary, therefore, to analyze how the propaganda created for export might vary from that distributed within the Soviet Union. Although the same key ideological tropes concerning the Canal remain, there is a major difference in this film, namely a predilection for documenting facts and figures regarding the construction project. Although some figures are mentioned in the other films, this really only occurs once in *Belomorstroi Reports*, where a list of the number of locks, dams, and dikes is included. *Port of Five Seas*, however, is like a veritable statistics report: 83,000 kilometers of railroad; 8,000 illiterate prisoners learn to read; 6,000 nearly illiterate prisoners receive an education; 15,000 prisoners finish advanced courses; 4,000 prisoners receive a technical education; 75 kilometers of rock is destroyed; 1,000,000 cubic meters of wood are claimed; 118 “works of art” (*ouvrages d’art*) are created (including 19 locks, 15 dams, 40 dikes, and 32 channels). The film’s predilection for detailing specific numbers speaks to the necessity to offer concrete and precise documentary proof of the achievements made in the Soviet Union.

Alongside this fixation on facts, there is also an emphasis on the concrete image of the map, as was discussed in the first section of this chapter. The film opens with a spinning globe with USSR written across it—reminiscent of the beginning of Ivan Pyr'ev's wildly popular musical *Circus* (*Tsirk*, 1936)—followed by a map where the cities of Stalingrad, DnieproGES, Magnitogorsk, Gor'kii, Khilingsorsk, Cheliabinsk, Kuznetsk, Moscow, Volkhov, appear; they are then followed by the appearance of railroad tracks drawn on the map, with animated trains moving around to connect all the cities. While this first map is meant to document the achievements of the first Five-Year Plan, an additional map notes the projections of the second:

The Belomor Plant, The Palace of Soviets, Bobriki, Lugansk, Solikansk, and Sverdlovsk. A third map denotes important cities in Russia: Rostov-on-Don, Odessa, Moscow, Leningrad, and Arkhangel'sk.

Finally, yet another map indicates bodies of water: the Black, Caspian, Baltic, White, and Azov Seas, with animated lines that link them all to Moscow, followed by a close-up on a map of the Karelia region. This film, unlike the previous two, strides into the future; it does not end with the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, but rather asserts that in 1935 Moscow will be the port of five seas.⁵⁵⁷ This accomplishment seems even greater than the feat of just one canal—this is a radical re-drawing of the map in light of the projects completed during the first and second Five-Year Plans. This more grandiose message—one that must be buttressed with statistical numbers and visual diagrams—is precisely what would be deemed the most appropriate for export, so as to maximize the sense of achievement and pride that the Soviet Union is attempting to portray.

The three sections in this chapter, Sketch, Stage, and Screen, help to illuminate key aspects of the impossible attempt to stage a performance of subjectivity in the utopian laboratory of the Belomorkanal. Sketch addresses the fantastical landscape of Stalinism through the exploration of travel guides as narratives; Stage incorporates these themes to see how they were performed but not necessarily believed; Screen demonstrates how montage was used to showcase a particular reality for the purposes of propaganda both in the Soviet Union and abroad. These

⁵⁵⁷ Like the slogans of “five in four” for the first Five-Year Plan and “quickly and cheaply” for the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the idea of Moscow being the “port of five seas” was a particularly contagious catchphrase. In my interview with Tedor Shumovskii, a prisoner who worked in the forests of the Canal, he mentioned the phrase numerous times as the ultimate goal of the project, imagining the larger, loftier goal of the administration rather than limiting his commentary to only a discussion of the Belomorkanal.

three categories intersect, all drawing from one another as they stake their claims and make their assertions. Similar to the complementary categories of Press and Performance, which allow for the category of Page, where the ideals of the documentary aesthetic and criminal world can be performed as a type of pseudo-subjectivity, so does the combination of the magical landscape of Sketch and the performance of *perekovka* in Stage permit the more general collapsing of opposites in Screen. In both instances, the impossibility of realization and the presence of the absurd become apparent.

Part of the incongruity of the Canal experience stems from the gesture to assemble a multitude of disparate parts into a collective whole: criminals and intellectuals work alongside one another; physical labor and creative effort mirror each other; visual and textual narratives echo each other. In the grand design of the Canal, wood meets water, the landscape is changed, and the various pieces of locks, dams and dikes are combined together to form a singular waterway.

Yet just as the collection of separate navigational features failed—the Canal was barely used, since it was too shallow for anything but barges and tourist ships—so did the collective message of *perekovka*, of utopian subjectivity and the individual biographies, artworks, and efforts that were subsumed to the collective.⁵⁵⁸ If we understand the Belomorkanal as a utopian laboratory, the construction's completion, ironically, actually served only to mark finally its unfeasibility: "The victory of a utopia means its death, since in victory the modal status of the utopian vision is transcended [...] The battle of the utopias is thus a battle for self-

⁵⁵⁸ Nevertheless, *perekovka* arguably did work to at least a certain extent, and the fact that cultural narratives regarding its existence still survive to this today underscores the persistence of the concept despite its potential failure.

annihilation.”⁵⁵⁹ Inherent in all of these texts, therefore, was the promise of their own violent destruction.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁹ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories*, Trans. Jesse M. Savage (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2005), 109.

⁵⁶⁰ The *History of the Construction*, although re-printed in 1988, was banned three years after its initial publication, with existing copies either destroyed or hidden away in secret libraries. The copies that did survive were often marred or physically altered; an original copy I saw in the Gulag Museum in Moscow had Averbakh’s name scratched out as an editor on the title page, most likely due to the writer’s fall from grace. Nikolai Pogodin’s play is no longer performed in Russia and its filmic equivalent barely exists in Russian film histories. Lemberg’s films can only be seen in the Krasnogorsk archive, where they do not even have records of the films’ distribution.

We'll remain as a trampled cigarette butt, as spittle,
 In the shade under a bench, where the corner won't let light play,
 And counting the days, we'll compress in embrace
 With the dirt, into humus, sludge, a cultural stratum.
 –Iosif Brodskii⁵⁶¹

...We have a history, and we are not going to argue if it is good or bad—
 it is our past and we must know it. Otherwise what type of people are we—
 without a past, and so, without a future?
 –Publisher, from re-print of the *History of the Construction of Stalin's White Baltic Sea Canal*⁵⁶²

At the 2009 National Convention for the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), a panel of scholars gathered to discuss the Soviet past as “traumatic object of contemporary Russian culture.” In the course of this discussion, one of the panelists countered the notion—often levied upon Russians by a patronizing West—that Russia needed to “face” its history and come to terms with its past, that it had not fully recognized the sins of the Stalinist era and needed to do so before it could “move forward.”⁵⁶³ This is a common enough statement, and one that may not seem all that surprising or misguided. Yet the tenacious insistence on

⁵⁶¹ «Мы останемся смятым окурком, плевром, в тени / Под скамей, куда угол проникнуть лучу не даст, / И слежимся в обнимку с грязью, считая дни, / В перегой, в осадок, в культурный пласт.»

⁵⁶² «...У нас есть прошлое, и не будем спорить, плохое оно или хорошее это – наше прошлое и мы должны его знать. Иначе что мы за народ – без прошлого, а значит, и без будущего?» From the epigraph of the 1998 re-printing of *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina: Istoriia stroitel'stva*.

⁵⁶³ The refutation of this point was asserted by Andrey Shcherbenok during the closing discussion of the panel.

witness and repentance, as some of the panelists argued, misses the point. Russia *is* facing its history. At an accelerating speed, the country is publishing histories, memoirs, diaries, letters; it is producing historical films and television programs; it is releasing archival documents and making radio shows; it is organizing retrospective exhibits and interview programs. If anything, there is almost an obsession with the Stalinist past by virtue of what is sold in stores and available as programming. These cultural sources, however, tend to follow a certain pattern. At *Dom knigi*, you can find shelves upon shelves of books on World War II battles, but fewer on the infamous history of Magadan; there are numerous options for criminal encyclopedias as well as prisoner memoirs, but there are virtually no offerings about day-to-day life in the Gulag. Yet despite the resources that are now available in Russia, political discussions and historical debates regarding responsibility do not form a part of society's dialogue; there is no assignment of guilt for the crimes of the past.

Nevertheless, the problem is not that Russia is not facing its past—it is simply not facing it in a way that can be rationally explained. The end result is a deeply conflicted attitude towards Stalinism, with an inextricable mixture of pride and shame allowing former Soviet citizens to praise and denigrate the former regime within the same sentence.⁵⁶⁴ Despite the fact that the vast majority of Russians are aware of Stalinist repression and the extent of the brutality of the Terror, many choose to remember the period during Stalin's rule as more optimistic, well-ordered, and friendly.⁵⁶⁵ While this may seem illogical to outside observers, it is difficult—precisely as an outsider—to put oneself in the position of having lived through the experience of

⁵⁶⁴ For examples and analyses of this dual practice, see Dina Khapaeva's extensive research on the subject, including: "Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society," *Social Research* 76 (Spring 2009): 359-94 and *Goticheskoe obshchestvo: morfologiya koshmara* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007).

⁵⁶⁵ Khapaeva, "Historical Memory," 360.

the Soviet Union and its decades of propaganda. Some scholars speculate that this historical amnesia may be the emotional and psychological result of trauma, with the severity of repression so grim that most choose to repress memories of the Gulag and the purges altogether.⁵⁶⁶ The focus here, however, will be on not the psychological repercussions of trauma but rather the reproducibility and ubiquity of Stalinist-era symbols in contemporary Russian culture; their presence facilitates a different type of discussion regarding the Soviet legacy.

It is necessary, however, to bear in mind the particularly conflicted attitude towards the Stalinist past while beginning an analysis of contemporary cultural artifacts related to the Canal. On the one hand, if we understand the legacy of the Gulag as a traumatic one, then it is perhaps surprising that such cultural artifacts exist at all—it is precisely the inability of articulation that creates the traumatic object. A traumatic event, therefore, is inherently paradoxical because it both demands urgent representation and yet shatters all frames of comprehension and reference.⁵⁶⁷ On the other hand, this difficulty in representation might be precisely what lends these contemporary cultural products their particular features, allowing for the repetition of graphic images—such as the Belomorkanal brand logo—that are more easily digestible and readily reproduced. Although interpretations of these materials may vary, what is certain is that there is a plethora of texts and objects related to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. One could be reminded of its existence every day in contemporary Russia, given the wide availability of commercial products that are named in its honor. It is not so much Russia's non-confrontation of its past that is at stake, but rather the manner in which it is confronted; it seems much more

⁵⁶⁶ Mark Lipovetskii and Aleksandr Etkind, "Vozvrashchenie triton: Sovetskaia katastrofa i postsovetskii roman," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 94 (2008): 174-206, 176-77; Dina Khapaeva, *Goticheskoe obshchestvo: morfologiia koshmara* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 81.

⁵⁶⁷ Frances Gurein and Roger Hallas, eds., *Figure and the Witness*, 3.

bizarre and inappropriate to have cigarettes named after an infamous Gulag camp than to have a memorial erected in its memory.

Just as the texts from the time of the Canal's construction are diverse in format, style, and form, so do the cultural narratives under discussion in this chapter embrace a multifarious set of approaches, perhaps even more diverse in quality: from collages to rock bands, from painting to poetry, from films to cigarette packaging—it seems that there is practically no corner of culture that is safe from infiltration by the project's legacy. Not only does this disparate and diverse second life of the Canal's thematic keep its story alive—in however unorthodox of a format—but it also indicates that the historical understanding of the Canal's reputation is still being contemplated, just as contemporary Russian society also grapples with finding the most appropriate attitude towards the Stalinist past.⁵⁶⁸ Given the complexity of historical memory regarding what is both a deadly Gulag project and an “achievement” of the first Five-Year Plan, the works discussed here neither accept the Belomor project's philosophical claims nor entirely disregard them. Instead, they reanimate prominent themes regarding the White Sea-Baltic Canal—such as the war against nature, *perekovka*, subjectivity, and utopia—in a novel way, often using a piecemeal or collage-style format. Despite certain similarities with their predecessors, the contemporary cultural products under discussion here make two important moves that are directly related to each other: they reclaim the collective as a traumatized body, and they infuse their works with a violent physicality that outstrips all previous, comparable examples from texts regarding the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

⁵⁶⁸ The search for a “usable” past continues to be of prime importance to contemporary Russian historians and politicians. For an interesting discussion of the recent attempt to normalize the Soviet past, see Khapaeva, “Historical Memory,” 361.

4.1 THE POETRY OF SERGEI STRATANOVSKII

Sergei Stratanovskii—a poet, critic, and bibliographer at the National Library in St. Petersburg—never spent any time in the Gulag yet became fascinated by the topic of Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal.⁵⁶⁹ Rather than lived experience, his attraction stems from an interaction with cultural texts, which Stratanovskii (see Figure 7) claims as the source of his inspiration: the



Figure 7: Sergei Stratanovskii. Photograph by author.

chapter on the Belomorkanal in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* and the philosophical writings of BelBaltLag prisoner Aleksandr Meier. Stratanovskii notes the incongruity of the Belomorkanal event in terms similar to those in the opening argument of this

⁵⁶⁹ Interview with author conducted at the St. Petersburg branch of the MEMORIAL human rights organization, 7 February 2007.

chapter; there is a disconnect between the propaganda advertising the Canal and the reality of its mass death. Nevertheless, as Stratanovskii notes, both are true—the Canal is completed in record time, yet it is a dark moment in Soviet history.

Iurii Serov, a representative of the documentary film studio Lennauchfil'm, made a similar comment regarding the paradoxicality of the Belomorkanal after we watched a documentary film about its history. Serov acknowledged that the topic of the Belomorkanal is so complicated because, unlike the film we had just seen, it was not a black and white matter. On the one hand, many people died at the Canal and it was a major catastrophe; on the other, according to Serov, it accomplished what it set out to do—it created a Canal and allowed some people to re-create themselves and be proud of their work.⁵⁷⁰ Although coming to terms with this anomaly is difficult, it is also a perfectly appropriate summation of Stalinist culture, and the Belomorkanal again serves as an apt case study for Stalinist culture as a whole, distilling contemporary Russian society's attitude towards the Soviet past. This conflicted attitude is one reason, perhaps, for what Stratanovskii would claim is the present-day indifference to the evils of the Gulag; people smoke Belomorkanal cigarettes without thinking about the potential implications, and many people harbor nostalgia for the Soviet period as an innate part of their consciousness.⁵⁷¹ Despite the current flood of information and memoirs in Russia, Stratanovskii claims that people actually knew more about the Gulag during its existence than they do today; although historical information is now more widely available, contemporary youth is simply not interested in exploring these resources.

Stratanovskii's poetic work about the Belomorkanal, "Waterway" (*Gidroarteriia*, 1985-1993), is written in the form of an oratorio composed of eleven titled sections, with each section

⁵⁷⁰ From an interview with author, 8 March 2007, Lennauchfil'm studios, St. Petersburg.

⁵⁷¹ From an interview with author. 8 February 2007, MEMORIAL Human Rights Society, St. Petersburg.

representing a different voice or group of the Canal's prisoner population.⁵⁷² The emphasis on aurality is evident, linking it with many of the works discussed in Chapter Two. The first section immediately captures the overall vocality of the poem, titled "The Chorus of Prisoners" (*Khor zakliuchennykh*), in which the convicts are immediately described as "outcasts" (*otverzhentsy*) on the Soviet land. Here, the notion of a collective body is still present, but it has been redefined; the prisoners acknowledge their identity as slaves and refuse. As in earlier texts, the diversity of the prison population is acknowledged—they are "priests, murderers, thieves" (*popy, ubiitsy, vory*)—while simultaneously being turned into an indistinguishable mass—they are simply a "collection of voices" (*sobor golosov*). Like the orchestras, songs, and dramatic productions that came before this poem, there is a musical performance of identity, but here the chorus demands rather than entertains. Relying on aural participation, the poem cries out "listen, listen to us, listen to us through the shadows,"⁵⁷³ in a plea that mirrors yet subverts the opening of Lemberg's documentary film *Belomorstoi Reports* (see the third section of Chapter Three), which also demands, "Listen!" repeatedly. Even if this ragtag crowd of prisoners may be lonely, lost, and poor, as the poem describes them, there is an element of strength in their collective misery and desire to be heard.

Just as the notion of the collective is infused with a raw physicality informed by the prisoners' recognition of themselves as slaves, so does the motif of *put'*, or pathway, introduce an element of violence. Both the Tsar's Road (in reference to Peter the Great's overland haul of ships; see Chapter One) and the Canal itself are figured as a road of bones, with the prisoners acknowledging themselves as such: "My – doroga kostei."⁵⁷⁴ The title of the poem,

⁵⁷² Sergei Stratanovskii, "Gidroarteriia," *Zvezda* 2 (1994): 75-77.

⁵⁷³ «Слушайте, слушайте нас / Слушайте нас через тьмы,» Stratanovskii, 75.

⁵⁷⁴ "We are a road of bones," Stratanovskii, 77.

“Gidroarteriia,” literally means a hydro-artery, naming the work with a reference to the human body. A waterway is a path that connects larger bodies of water and institutions with one another, just as the veins and arteries of the human body connect to organs in order to allow them to function. The fact that the human bodies have literally become part of the natural landscape makes the leap from industrial construction project to human organic matter less drastic; the physicality of flesh and the materiality of industry have become inseparable.

Subjectivity is a prominent theme in the poem, and the seemingly endless attempts for the masses to define themselves borders on obsessive; “We are outcasts of the Soviet land,” “We are a chorus of voices,” “We are free refuse,” “We are an inkblot in history,” “We are a road of bones,” “We are canal army members,” “We are soldiers,” “We were wreckers,” “We will be victors.”⁵⁷⁵ The definition is dependent on the theme of the stanza; the first seven classifications come from the first and last verses, both titled “The Chorus of Prisoners” (*Khor zakliuchennykh*) and the last two—rather different—definitions of selfhood come from the section titled simply “Engineer” (*Inzhener*). These self-identifications attest to the need for everyone associated with the Canal project to define themselves as well as his or her relationship to work, and the need for a repetitive assertion of selfhood becomes urgent in light of the collectivizing and homogenizing effect of the Stalinist labor camps. The demarcation of subjectivity reaches a feverish pitch—with the help of word play—in the final verse of the oratory that is titled identically to the first (“Chorus of Prisoners”):

Listen to us—it’s us

Listen, listen to us

⁵⁷⁵ «Отверженцы земли / Советской – мы; мы – собор голосов; Мы – бесплатное быдло; Мы в истории – кляска; мы – дорога костей; Мы каналармейцы, солдаты; Были мы – вредители / Будем – победители.» Stratanovskii, 75-77.

We are from a hole, from shadows
 We speak from the depths of the earth
 We are canal-armymen, soldiers ...
 It's not us, not slaves
 You are not slaves, and neither are we
 Slaves are muter than fish
 And we, as a reward—have graves⁵⁷⁶

The wordplay of *my*, *vy*, *raby*, and *ryby* cannot be captured in the English translation; the rhyming of these words plays with the negligible differences between “us” and “you,” between “slaves” and “fish.” Despite the earlier classification of self according to profession or social status—for example, engineer or non-political prisoner—here there is a sense of collectivity; all of them are prisoners and ultimately face the same fate.

In an analysis of subjectivity in the poem, it is necessary to contrast the (much more common) use of the pronoun “we” with the examples of the individualized pronoun “I,” the latter occurring most frequently in the stanza entitled “Kulak” (*Raskulachennyi*). Kulaks were the largest portion of the Belomorkanal’s prisoner population, and in this verse the reader glimpses their tragic fate; the “rapists of the earth” (*nasil'niki zemli*) come to seize the peasants’ livestock, confiscate their bread, devastate their homes, and divide their household belongings. Given that kulaks were defined as wealthy, landowning peasants, it is perhaps not surprising that here the

⁵⁷⁶ «Слушайте нас – это мы / Слушайте, слушайте нас / Мы из провала, из тьмы / Из последней земли говорим / Мы – каналоармейцы, солдаты [...] Это не мы, не рабы / Вы – не рабы, а не мы / Рыбы немее рабы / Мы, а в награду – гробы.» Stratavnovskii, 77. Interestingly, nearly this exact phrasing (*my ne raby, raby ne my*) appears in a propagandistic documentary film on Solovki, as a teacher writes the words on a blackboard in what looks like a classroom. This demonstrates how contemporary works draw from official, ideological ones to create cultural commentary.

individualistic “I” takes precedence over the collective “we,” and that the definition of the self is cruel and harsh:

And since then I am a slave
And God will not give me even
A crude grave
When he finds out that I’m dead
I am a Belomorkanal *zek*⁵⁷⁷

Although not translatable into English because there is no equivalent, the verb chosen for “die” in the above passage (*dokhnut’*) is used primarily for animals, underscoring the status of the prisoners as mere expendable livestock. Unapologetic identifications of the self occur in the opening and closing lines of the stanza: “I am a slave” and “I am a *zek*” (*zek* a word for a Gulag prisoner that comes from the abbreviation z/k for *zakliuchennyi*). However grim the context, these bold declarations of individuality modestly reclaim some type of identity in the name of the lost masses, even if the collective body remains the central focus.

While some of the stanzas have an individual personality at their head: “poet,” “historian,” “philosopher,” “engineer,” “Chekist,” others denote a collective group: “Chorus of Prisoners” and “Chorus of Non-Political Prisoners.” The collective body that is here formed is much more misshapen and haphazard than its predecessors, and the group ultimately does not sing in a unified voice. Stratanovskii is hesitant, as many writers are, to offer any clear meaning behind the symbols in his poem, preferring instead for readers to draw their own conclusions. Yet when I insisted on asking him about the role of the chorus—what I take to be the most important aspect of the poem and also what relates most directly to the present research—he

⁵⁷⁷ «И с той поры – я – раб / И даже грубый гроб / Мне не подарит Бог / Когда узнает: сдох / Я беломорский зэк.» Stratanovskii, 77.

offered that the chorus represents a “general consciousness” (*obshchee soznanie*) of the people. The “chorus” of prisoners and “chorus” of non-political prisoners, as well as the definition of the poem as an oratory, bind it to musical and performative motifs.

The dramatic transmogrification of nature is an important theme in the poem, and it is often related to historical legacy and utopian/dystopian characteristics. Stratanovskii chooses Faust as a vehicle to explicate this change in nature. It is an appropriate selection for a multitude of reasons: the desire to re-shape nature according to man’s will in Goethe’s *Faust* parallels the efforts at the Canal; Faust is mentioned in numerous other works regarding the Canal (ones both contemporaneous with the Canal’s construction and those that come afterwards);⁵⁷⁸ and Stratanovskii claims that the philosopher Meier’s work on *Faust* is one of his original inspirations for writing the poem. Goethe’s *Faust* is a rich summation of the issues connected with the Belomorkanal project, including the desire to organize and control the world by understanding it; the role of aesthetic production in redemption; the innate human desire to strive; the significance of the deed; and the creation of new man (with the homunculus symbolically paralleling the idea of re-forging).⁵⁷⁹

Yet perhaps the most direct connection comes in the second part of *Faust*, with the failed attempt at building a system of dikes. Part II, which is much more historical, action-oriented,

⁵⁷⁸ The connection of *Faust* with various personalities involved in the White Sea-Baltic Canal is deep and complex. Gor’kii himself expressed a desire to write a version of *Faust* in 1906-07; see Nina Berberova, *Moura: The Dangerous Life of Baroness Budberg* (NY: NYRB, 1998), 96. Vera Inber, one of the authors of the *History of the Construction*, writes quotations from Goethe in her diary in 1933, just at the time she would be participating in the Canal project. The philosopher and Belomorkanal prisoner Aleksandr Meier, as already noted, writes at length about *Faust*. Lev Losev also mentions *Faust* (*Zhizn’* 312).

⁵⁷⁹ The homunculus is created in a laboratory from liquid vapors from the sea, offering more connections with the present research. Alchemy, the premiere science of the eighteenth century, held promise of discovering new formulas and creating new chemical experiments. The idea of re-forging, or the smelting of metals, is itself a type of chemical process. There is, however, a key difference between the homunculus and the re-forged prisoner; the former is all mind and spirit in search of a body, whereas the latter is privileged precisely because of the physical body’s ability to produce labor, with the thinking mind downplayed.

and focused on the communal, is an apt landscape for thematics related to the White Sea-Baltic Canal to emerge. Faust's blinding at the end of Part II is metaphorical; he believes that the construction project—a reclamation of land from the sea—is being built for him, but in reality it is his own grave, just as the prisoners at BelBaltLag are essentially constructing a “road of bones.” Even though Faust will find out that “the only way for modern man to transform himself...is by radically transforming the whole physical and social world he lives in,” such efforts and the “great developments he initiates—intellectual, moral, economic, social—turn out to exact great human costs.”⁵⁸⁰

It is not surprising, therefore, that specifically the trope of war against nature would be particularly highlighted in the two stanzas titled “A Chekist by the Name of Faust” (*Chekist po familii Faustov*). In the first of these two stanzas, an introductory sentence informs the reader that the Belomorkanal is “not just the construction of a large waterway—it is the beginning of the great task of re-imagining nature.”⁵⁸¹ Alongside this re-creation of nature, man will be re-created.⁵⁸² The Chekist arrogantly claims they will become masters of the natural environment: they will flood the rivers, make the birds unnecessary, and tame nature like a “beast in a cage” (*kak zveria v kletku*)⁵⁸³ in the name of the Five-Year Plan. In a parallel that the poem makes with the orthographic reforms of the Russian Revolution, the animals will be abolished like the letter “iat’.” While the poem employs the same kind of terminology used in other cultural texts regarding the Canal, here the end result is clearly a dystopian, rather than utopian, vision.

⁵⁸⁰ Marshall Berman, “Faust as Developer,” *Faust*, Trans. Walter Arndt, Ed., Cyrus Hamlin (New York: Norton, 2001), 717.

⁵⁸¹ «Это не просто строительство большого пути – это начало великого дела преобразования природы.» Stratanovskii, 76.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

The philosopher Meier, who served as an inspiration for Stratanovskii and was an important *Faust* critic, himself worked as a hydro-technical specialist at the Belomorkanal. He was able to hold this favorable occupation after completing special courses at the camp site, and his prison experience was similar to that of other intelligentsia members discussed here; he continued to work on his own intellectual projects while in prison, was released early, and subsequently worked on the Moscow-Volga Canal as a free citizen. Meier wrote very actively in the 1930s, and he called this period a “summing up” (*vremia podvedeniia itogov*) of his work. Some of his most intimate works, including *Victim* (*Zhertva*) and *Three Sources* (*Tri istoka*) were written in Medvezh'ia Gora, the capital of the Belomorkanal construction.⁵⁸⁴

In a section entitled “Observations on the Sense of Mystery” (*Zametki o smysle misterii*) from *Victim*, Meier discusses the interconnections among myth, rhythm, and secrets: “The rhythmic, symbolic word, that is the myth, is in and of itself a pathway to the absolute,”⁵⁸⁵ and he goes on to argue that the word has not only a musical rhythm but also a rhythm related to sense. It is significant that the idea of rhythm plays such a central role in Meier’s philosophical extrapolations specifically during the time when he is living at BelBaltLag, and it offers another example consistent with the auditory motifs that have been discussed thus far. Perhaps even more directly related to the White Sea-Baltic Canal, however, is his commentary on water, which also brings to mind *Faust*’s homunculus:

The beginning of life is a wet beginning, everything living comes out of moisture,
the carrier of the seed hides itself in the form of living existence, is moisture,
fertilizing strength, without which the earth would be dry and fruitless, moisture

⁵⁸⁴ Aleksandr Meier, *Filosoficheskie sochinenia* (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1982), 20.

⁵⁸⁵ «Ритмическое, символическое слово, т.е. миф, есть само по себе путь к абсолютному.» Meier, 141.

at the same time resuscitates, makes fresh, rouses what has fallen, is tired or dying.⁵⁸⁶

Meier cites another liquid—blood—as the key to life, and notes that a “rhythmic flood” (*ritmicheskii potok*) can actually weaken the spirit.⁵⁸⁷ Just as there is a raw physicality apparent in Stratanovskii’s verse, so does it exist in Meier’s philosophical writings from the time period of the Canal’s construction. During a project in which death and suffering was an everyday affair—with the landscape itself as a mass grave—this physicality seems appropriate, and it is an often explored motif by contemporary artists working with the legacy of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

Alina Mal'tseva, another St. Petersburg poet, also chooses Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal as a subject for her verse.⁵⁸⁸ Her “Poem about the Belomorkanal” (*Poema o Belomorkanale*, 1995) begins with a mystical, rather than physical, part of the body: “The northern part of my soul / Whispers to me: ‘Soon you will write / About freedom...’”⁵⁸⁹ Similar to Stratanovskii, the prisoners are related to mute fish, carcasses that have become imbedded in the landscape. There is a “crimson abyss” above the Canal that “throws thunder,” perhaps in an attempt at revenge.⁵⁹⁰ The depths of the new waters are “paved with bones” as well as stones.⁵⁹¹ There is a schizophrenic musicality in the poem, with the moans of prisoners juxtaposed with the sounds of the orchestra. Mal'tseva’s work, therefore, continues some of the efforts made by

⁵⁸⁶ «Жидкое начало есть начало жизни, из влаги исходит все живое, влага – носитель семени, которое раскрывает себя в форме живого существа, влага – оплодотворяющая сила, без которой земля суха и бесплодна, она в то же время оживляет, освежает, поднимает падающее, усталое, умирающее...» Meier, 143.

⁵⁸⁷ Meier, 145.

⁵⁸⁸ Despite her St. Petersburg location and the recent publication of her poetry, it was not possible to locate Mal'tseva for an interview, and none of my contacts at the St. Petersburg branch of MEMORIAL knew of her whereabouts.

⁵⁸⁹ «Северная часть моей души / Шепчет мне / «Скорее напиши / Про волну...» Alina Mal'tseva, “Поэма о Belomorkanale” (St. Petersburg: Real, 1995), 3.

⁵⁹⁰ «Над каналом в бездне алой / Туча молний метала,» 7.

⁵⁹¹ «Как дно для новых вод мостили / И камнями, и костями...» 8.

Stratanovskii: the infusion of physicality—including mass death—into the poem as well as the exploration of auditory motifs. The frequent choice of poetry in expressing the White Sea-Baltic Canal experience indicates its facility as a medium for this task,⁵⁹² a capability that exists because of the performative nature of poetry and its relationship to music and song.

4.2 THE PAINTINGS OF PETR BELOV

Like Stratanovskii, the artist Petr Belov did not serve any time in the Gulag, nor were any of his family members victimized by the Stalinist Terror. In his early career, Belov worked mostly as a set designer and a landscape painter, but in his later life he chose the atrocity and terror of Soviet rule as a theme for a final, masterful series of paintings. Symbolically, he selected this rather morbid subject around the time he himself had fallen ill after suffering a heart attack, confronted by his own mortality; the artist passed away in 1988. Two of these paintings, *White Sea Canal (Belomorkanal)*, 1985) and *The Rooks Have Arrived, or April Plenary Session (Grachi prileteli, ili aprel'skii plenum)*, 1987) will be the focus of the discussion here, and these works continue the contemporary efforts to reclaim the victims of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.⁵⁹³

In *Belomorkanal*, Belov uses a modern manifestation of the Canal's legacy—an empty pack of Belomorkanal brand cigarettes—as the centerpiece of his painting. The pack, what is essentially a piece of garbage, takes up nearly the entire canvas, with a string of barbed wire in

⁵⁹² There are many other examples of poetic works dedicated to Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, many of which have a much more sympathetic assessment of the project than the verses discussed here. The pro-Stalinist Konstantin Simonov wrote "Belomorskie stikhi" ("Belomor Poetry") and "Belomortsy," ("Belomor,"), Vasilii Kazin wrote "Belomorskaia poema" ("Belomor Poem,") and S. Olender's poem "Belomorskie vechera" ("Belomor Nights") appeared in the April 1934 issue of the popular Soviet magazine *30 dni (Thirty Days)*.

⁵⁹³ For paintings and biographical information, see *Petr Belov: 1929-1988*, Moscow: 1989. Introduction written by Anatolii Smelianskii.

the lower left-hand corner reminding the viewer that we are in the landscape of a Gulag camp. From the right-hand side, an indistinguishable mass of prisoners walks into a hole at the top of the cigarette pack; some have wheelbarrows, others hold shovels. The faces of the prisoners are impossible to differentiate. They are one lump, a mass of humanity that eventually melts into a shadow of black on the right side of the canvas. They are walking towards their fate—the empty promise of a construction project called the Belomorkanal, where the scale of life is entirely shifted; the human bodies are only as tall as an empty cigarette pack—people and object are made equivalent to one another. Both human lives and cigarette packs are disposable, and the painting eloquently captures the absurdity of death and destruction.

While *Belomorkanal* exclusively highlights the collective mass of prisoners, there are some gestures towards individuality in Belov's *The Rooks Have Arrived*. In a small, half-frozen stream between two sheets of ice, individual faces of prisoners can be discerned. This painting visually captures the idea that the Canal is a “road of bones,” with the victims of its construction permanently submerged under water. The body of water in the painting is not a grandiose canal; instead, it is a tiny stream, mirroring the too-shallow reality of the actual Canal. On the left bank of the ice stream, which comprises the majority of the painting, there is a collection of garbage that includes squashed cigarette butts, empty cans, newspapers, and a vodka bottle. The refuse heap parallels the prisoners' underwater faces; they are side-by-side in the painting and made equivalent. Once again, the convicts are mere bits of garbage, their eyes closed permanently in the frosty embrace of death, their positioning reminiscent of the *besplatnoe bydlo* (worthless trash) in Stratanovskii's poem. The White Sea-Baltic Canal is directly referenced by the inclusion of an empty pack of Belomorkanal brand cigarettes in the junk heap, this time crumpled up as a real piece of garbage would be. This Belov painting perhaps captures the

absurdity of the Canal project even more directly than *Belomorkanal*; although the faces of the forgotten are permanently inscribed in the depths of the water, spring has arrived—as the title indicates and the arrival of birds foreshadows. Yet even this natural event is coupled with political significance; the return of the rooks accompanies the April Plenary Session.⁵⁹⁴ Nevertheless, spring has come, and despite the loss of life, Soviet power has not been able to completely transmogrify nature according to its will, since it still follows the cyclical pattern of seasons. The natural elements—snow, birds, water—are nearly exactly balanced by man-made elements—garbage, a clock tower, murder victims. This painting is one of the few *Belomorkanal* works to address time as well as space so directly, although the hands of the clock are submerged just as the people are, indicating that time, too, has been drowned.

Belov's repeated use of *Belomorkanal* cigarette packs in his paintings necessitates additional commentary. The ongoing availability of this brand of *papirosy* in Russia today has become a rather embarrassing symbol of the Canal project; contemporary critics often point out derisively that Germany has no cigarette brand named Auschwitz or Dachau, as if these examples would somehow be the equivalent.⁵⁹⁵ I contend, however, that the Gulag as a whole—despite certain commonalities with Nazi concentration camps—operated under entirely different historical and cultural circumstances. Precisely the fact that the *Belomorkanal* brand does exist—and continues to be popular and in wide use to this very day—already suggests that the historical conditions are different. The cigarette brand, in fact, has become more emblematic of the Canal than the actual waterway itself; while the latter is rarely used because of its too-narrow

⁵⁹⁴ The work also clearly references the 1871 painting *Grachi prileteli* by Aleksei Savrasov, which Russians know as both a beautiful work and a symbolic harbinger of spring.

⁵⁹⁵ *Tvorchesto i byt GULAGa* (Moscow: Zven'ia, 1998), Introduction. See also L. Rubinshtein, *Domashnee muzitsirovanie* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), 222.

size, everyone is familiar with Belomorkanal cigarettes.⁵⁹⁶ The true reality of the Canal—a construction project built entirely by prisoners—has been displaced by a brand of *papirosy*. There is perhaps no other text or material from the White Sea-Baltic Canal experience that as adeptly captures the notion of absurdity inherent in the project as the reality of this cigarette brand; far from being an inexplicable phenomenon, the cigarettes’ availability in contemporary Russia makes perfect sense as a symbol for the Canal project precisely because of its irrationality.

Furthermore, it is not just Belov who employs the cigarette packs in his works; rather, they have become a common reference point for numerous artists and filmmakers. The *shanson*⁵⁹⁷ music group Belomorkanal uses the curved logo of the brand of cigarettes on all of their album covers, referencing the *papirosy*—and thereby the White-Sea Canal project as a whole—textually as well as pictorially, serving to further ingrain the cigarette brand as an instantly recognizable emblem for the Gulag project. With song titles like “Letter from Prison” (*Pis'mo iz lageria*), “Night before Execution” (*Noch' pered rasstrelom*), “Thief” (*Vor*), “Zek in Freedom” (*Zek na vole*), and “I Am Not Guilty” (*Ia ne vinovat*) from their album *Song Frame of Mind* (*Nastroenie shanson*, 2005), the group clearly attempts to address elements of criminal life in their music.

Recent Russian films also use the logo symbolically, with the cigarette label’s recognizability allowing for specific associations to be made by the viewer. An administrator main character in Iulii Gusman’s 2006 film *Soviet Park* (*Park Sovetskogo perioda*) smokes

⁵⁹⁶ *Vokrug sveta*, <http://www.vokrugsveta.com/body/zemla/belomor.htm>, 7 February 2010.

⁵⁹⁷ The genre of music known as *shanson*, popularized by modern singers such as Mikhail Krug, is also sometimes referred to as *blatnaia muzyka*, demonstrating its connection to the criminal realm.

Belomorkanal cigarettes; as one of the cruelest and most corrupt officials in this Soviet-themed Disneyland, his tobacco habits do not seem incidental (Figure 8). The recent American film



Figure 8: The film *Soviet Park* (*Park Sovetskogo perioda*).

Transsiberian (Brad Anderson, 2008) also features Belomorkanal cigarettes. In the opening scene of the film, corrupt Russian detectives investigate a crime scene, most likely gang-related, that includes frozen dead bodies on an abandoned tanker at sea. The chief inspector smokes Belomorkanal *papirosy* in a particularly extreme close-up shot (Figure 9). In both the musical and filmic examples, the rough and raw nature of criminal or prison life is highlighted by using the cigarette pack as a semiotic marker.



Figure 9: The film *Transsiberian*.

A semiotic reading of the Belomorkanal brand's logo can help to underscore its popularity and reproducibility. As Iurii Lotman argues, art, given its requisite decoding, exists as a “secondary modeling system.”⁵⁹⁸ Art, unlike language, deviates from established systems and upsets the potential of automatic perception. Lotman also discusses images, which he claims require less complex codes.⁵⁹⁹ Given its direct resemblance to an object and its graphic nature, the image appears more truthful and seems to belong more to the primary modeling system of language—instantaneous comprehension, less complex codes—rather than the secondary modeling system of art—non-automatic comprehension, complex codes. With its arched curve accompanied by the word “Belomorkanal,” the brand's logo combines both image and text, making its apprehension even more immediate and less complex, since both language and image belong to the more easily understood primary modeling system. In a complication of this matter, however, the logo is used frequently in artworks, such as in Belov's paintings. What belongs to the primary modeling system (language/image) now becomes incorporated into an example of a

⁵⁹⁸ Iurii Lotman, *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970), 17.

⁵⁹⁹ Lotman, 73-74.

secondary modeling system (art), in a move that simplifies the otherwise complex code of aesthetic works and allows their significance to be more readily digested and instantly understood.

In the logo, the word Belomorkanal is sandwiched between two curved arches composed of numerous lines. These archways are akin to rainbows, with the separate lines mimicking the individual colors of a rainbow's composition—a symbol that represents good luck in Russian as well as American culture. The curved arches, given the Canal's watery existence, also bring to mind the rounded slopes of currents or waves. The repetition of the two arches on either side of the word Belomorkanal also could be interpreted as the two banks of the Canal, with the text running through the middle as the waterway's content. The logo as pictured on the cigarette and vodka brand also includes a map, referring to the ever-important Soviet alteration of nature. Significantly, the map does not simply document the area of the White Sea-Baltic Canal itself; instead, it includes multiple cities in a large swath of landscape in order to affirm the existence of Moscow as the "port of five seas." In yet another example, the legacy of the Belomorkanal reaches beyond itself; not meant to be bound merely to Karelia or to the period of its construction, it instead becomes emblematic of the whirlwind of change occurring in the country more broadly during the Soviet period.

Even in the non-visual realm of jokes, or *anekdoty*, the Belomorkanal brand of cigarettes has made an appearance. This tendency again demonstrates the durability of the cigarette brand as a type of equivalent for the Canal; indeed, some claim that the Canal is "celebrated, but not famous" because it is known most directly through the brand of cigarettes and not the actual construction, which is too deficient to be used to any extensive degree because of its

shallowness.⁶⁰⁰ One of the most common jokes (*anekdoty*) about the Belomorkanal directly references the cigarette pack in an untranslatable pun:

Two pilots with bad hangovers are getting ready to take off. The captain asks the navigator:

–Did you bring the maps?

–And also two new decks of cards.

–Bah! Again flying by the “Belomor” pack.⁶⁰¹

Since the word *karty* in Russian means both maps and playing cards, the joke can simultaneously reference the map that is on the cigarette pack as well as card-playing, one of the most common criminal pastimes.⁶⁰² Another untranslatable joke about the Belomorkanal claims, “The new Belomorkanal cigarettes are superlight...you have to have super lungs in order to smoke these cigarettes!”⁶⁰³ Yet perhaps the most common⁶⁰⁴ joke regarding the Belomorkanal does not refer to the cigarette pack:

–Do you know who built the Belomorkanal?

–The right bank was built by those who told the joke and the left by those who heard it.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁰ *Vokrug sveta*, <http://www.vokrugsveta.com/body/zemla/belomor.htm>, 7 February 2010.

⁶⁰¹ Два летчика (экипаж) с большого бодуна собираются взлетать. Капитан спрашивает у штурмана:

- Ты карты взял?

- А как же две новые колоды.

- Тыфу ты, опять по пачке "Беломора" лететь.

<http://myabris.ru/page.php?id=139&PHPSESSID=b3f05700ad9153addd9a0ca509b51640>, 16 February 2010.

⁶⁰² See Chapter Two, page 124 for further discussion of the role of cards in prison life.

⁶⁰³ Новые сигареты Беломорканал суперлёгкие... Надо иметь суперлёгкие, чтобы курить эти сигареты!

http://anekdoti.ru/jokes.php?joke_category=90, 16 February 2010.

⁶⁰⁴ I am making this claim after informally surveying former Gulag survivors and others familiar with Soviet culture when I asked them about the existence of jokes regarding the Belomorkanal; this joke was always the most commonly told, with the one regarding the pilots as a close second.

⁶⁰⁵ Знаете, кто строил Беломорканал?

– Один берег строили те, кто рассказывал анекдот, а другой – те, кто его слушал. As told to me by former Gulag prisoner Viacheslav Dalinin.

Although this joke is different from the others in that it does not refer to the *papirosy*, it has more in common with the Russian *anekdot* tradition in the sense that it is self-referential, alluding to the inherent danger of joke telling. Given the significance of the Canal's construction as an iconic Soviet project, it is perhaps surprising that there are not even more jokes regarding the waterway; perhaps because the Canal was built in a mere twenty months, there was not the requisite period of time needed for folk culture to develop.

It seems clear that the Belomorkanal cigarette packs have morphed into an important cultural symbol, and their existence is often used as evidence for Russia's insensitivity to the legacy of the Gulag. Not only the consumption of the cigarettes but also their appearance in other contexts seems to corroborate this lack of historical cognizance. For example, at the Gulag Museum in Moscow, a display containing the "most important possessions of a Gulag prisoner" contains not only items we would expect—like a spoon or mess pan—but also a pack of Belomorkanal cigarettes. Although cigarettes were certainly valuable possessions for prisoners, the fact that specifically Belomorkanal brand cigarettes were chosen for the display seems incongruous, even if the brand was chosen simply for its association with the Gulag. Why would a prisoner want to smoke a brand of cigarettes named after one of the most deadly construction projects that claimed thousands of lives? Perhaps part of the reason lies in the fact that the Belomorkanal brand is virtually the only option if one wants to smoke the distinctive style of Russian *papirosy*, a harsher type of cigarette with a large paper filter.

Nevertheless, although the tendency is to point out the absurdity of having such a product available at all, I assert that this odd vehicle of commemoration for the Canal project is actually extremely appropriate. Just as grief stemming from the Soviet experience often manifests itself

in contemporary literature rather than in open dialogue,⁶⁰⁶ so does the historical legacy of the Gulag make an appearance in material culture at least as much as in formal monuments. Belov's paintings can help us to understand why the symbol of the Belomorkanl cigarette pack is quite useful in contemporary art. The prisoners at the White Sea-Baltic Canal were, on some level, refuse; they were used as ideological containers and laboring work horses. The fact, therefore, that the construction would be memorialized on something as impermanent as a cigarette pack demonstrates the disposability of the prisoners. Cigarette packs—and cigarettes themselves—are nothing of substance; they are consumed immediately as smoke that disappears into the air and cardboard cartons that are crumpled and thrown away in the garbage.

Despite the supposed economic and cultural magnitude of the Canal's construction, the impact of the waterway on the Karelian region is much less than what was originally forecast. The cigarette container itself embodies this disparity; on both the original and current design of the label, a map of the Canal is featured, demonstrating the ability of Soviet power to transform the landscape permanently. Yet the supposed permanence of this achievement is eroded by the very disposability of the pack itself, allowing it to appear as pieces of garbage in numerous contemporary cultural products. Trash itself has more generally become an important component of our postmodernist culture. The contemporary critic Mikhail Epstein organized collective discussions in Russia on specified themes—one of which included garbage—for his "laboratory" of contemporary culture.⁶⁰⁷

This type of makeshift memorial can be dramatically contrasted with its Holocaust counterparts. The prisoners at Auschwitz were not engaged in construction; they were not used exclusively for their physical labor and they did not leave behind evidence—in the form of an

⁶⁰⁶ Lipovetskii and Etkind, 176.

⁶⁰⁷ Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments*, 52.

industrial project—of their physical toil while imprisoned. Although at certain strategic moments during the Holocaust, some Jews were used for their professional abilities or trades, this percentage was small and diminished continuously as the war progressed. More often, the promise of work and supposed necessity of Jews for factories and various labor projects was a mere disguise for the actual, much more sinister, purpose at hand. The Nazi concentration camps existed exclusively for the extermination of unwanted elements of the population, whereas the Gulag—although certainly a means for political oppression—was an important, even if failed, component of the country’s economic structure as well as an ideological school for those deemed to be enemies of the state.

This difference in function completely separates the two experiences as well as the memorials in their honor. The monuments honoring the Jewish victims of the Holocaust are a gesture at permanence, an attempt to recapture and make solid and present the numerous lives that were lost; many of these memorials feature repeated elements as their centerpiece. In Krakow, there is a scattering of many silver chairs over a large square near Schindler’s factory; in Berlin, there is a collection of many differently-sized white stones; in Brooklyn, NY a field of tablet markers denotes specific individuals, camps, and historical locales. A comparison of these memorial sites with their Gulag counterparts underscores their different historical legacies; markers in honor of the Gulag tend to be modest, non-specific, and contained. A rock from Solovki resting on the banks of the St. Petersburg simply states “to the victims of the Gulag” (*uznikam Gulaga*, see Figure 10). A rock from Solovki was also used in the memorial for



Figure 10: Gulag memorial site, St. Petersburg. Photograph by author.

victims of the Terror that sits in Lubyanka square in Moscow. Once again, this site does not denote individual people or camp names, and it consists of one large, solid piece of stone (see Figure 11). In addition to embodying the collective, the usage of solid stone also represents a gesture of permanence, a kind of timeless memorial. The fact that such types of hard rock were often present at the Gulag sites themselves, including Solovki and the Belomor construction, makes this choice seem all the more appropriate.



Figure 11: Terror memorial site, Moscow. Photograph by author.

In Russia, it is mainly the memorials in honor of World War II that seem to share commonalities with their Holocaust counterparts. In Victory Park in Moscow, the various sites of victories are memorialized in a large column stretching defiantly towards the sky. The magnitude and specificity of this marker demonstrates the continued significance of World War II in the historical consciousness of the Russian people and Zurab Tsereteli, known for his flamboyant and grandiose sculptural designs, was an ideal architect for the project. Russians tend to recall World War II—and not political oppression—as the most difficult and sensitive moment in their recent history, and it is around this event that Russians rally with patriotic spirit.⁶⁰⁸ Memorials, holidays, and historical programs, therefore, are focused around events connected with World War II rather than the long—and arguably more severe and bloody—

⁶⁰⁸ Khapaeva, “Historical Memory,” 365.

experience of the prison camps and political terror (see Figure 12 for a large display in Red Square dedicated to the sixtieth anniversary of Russia's victory). While Russia's participation in World War II can be viewed with pride, honor, and a sense of shared hardship, the more complex phenomenon of the Gulag often evades representation in any type of straightforward manner.



**Figure 12: Red Square memorial in honor of the 60th anniversary of victory in World War II.
Photograph by author.**

The availability of Belomorkanal cigarettes, therefore, is not an anomaly. And despite disparaging criticism from cultural commentators, the brand remains popular, especially for smoking products less legal than tobacco. Contemporary Russian magazines acknowledge that the cigarettes are now more famous than the Canal itself.⁶⁰⁹ Not only do the cigarettes remain

⁶⁰⁹ *Vokrug sveta*, <http://www.vokrugsveta.com/body/zemla/belomor.htm>, 9 February 2009.

available in spite of their condemnation, but an affordable vodka has been added to the Belomorkanal brand of products (Figure 2). The vodka also uses a map of the Canal region for its label and also represents an inexpensive, easily consumed, and hastily disposed product. It is not insignificant that Belomorkanal would be chosen as a brand name for cigarettes and vodka—two products detrimental to one’s health that are focused on immediate usage followed by disposal. In Belov’s *The Rooks Have Arrived*, a bottle of vodka, although not the Belomorkanal brand, accompanies the crumpled cigarette packs in the refuse pile on the snowy ice patch.

4.3 THE COLLAGES OF VADIM VOINOV

Given the essential role that collage plays—both as literary technique and as ideological metaphor—to the present research, Vadim Voinov’s art pieces are especially adept examples of the Canal’s legacy in contemporary culture. Voinov was born into the Party elite; his father served as the director of the Propaganda Center, his cousin studied with Stalin’s daughter, and his uncle was a right-hand man to Andrei Zhdanov and eventually became the first secretary of the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Regional Party Committee. At one point, this uncle was even suggested as a successor to Stalin, although his untimely execution prevented it. Voinov’s father was arrested when the artist was nine years old, and he eventually passed away in a hospital for veterans wounded in World War II. Despite their closeness to the regime—or precisely because of it—Voinov’s family members faced many hardships. Voinov studied art history and architecture, and worked as a sailor, before becoming involved in the art world in the 1970s. His art pieces have complex spatial relationships and profound historical suggestions, demonstrating his parallel interests in architecture and museum studies.

When I met with Vadim Voinov at the artistic-cultural center Pushkinskaia 10, which houses his studio as well as a permanent collection of his work, he acknowledged the link between his work and the collage experiments from the 1920s and 1930s. The prison camps serve as a common motif in his works, and he had read the collectively-written *History of the Construction*, which he called an “anti-book” (*anti-kniga*). He recognized that he had faced difficulties because of the very sensitive, political nature of his collages’ themes, yet claimed that what was most important was that he continued to produce artworks and function as an artist.⁶¹⁰ Voinov follows the tradition common to contemporary art of using found objects. His artwork often includes everyday objects and many of his pieces, given their three-dimensionality, might better be categorized as assemblages, even though the term collage is used more frequently in describing his work.

In Voinov’s constructions, random objects are put together that prompt particular connections in the viewer’s mind, not unlike Eisenstein’s montage technique in film. These items are replete “with the blood and flesh of existence, creating a Benjaminesque ‘aura of authenticity,’ and for this reason they pester and importune, demanding the viewer’s attention, demanding decipherment.”⁶¹¹ The emphasis on “flesh and blood” in this explication, as well as Voinov’s specific choice of everyday objects, injects Voinov’s art works with physicality and rawness. Items that have been ripped from their usual contexts, stripped from the mundane world in which they had a home, now become violently transformed into art objects. Not insignificantly, many of Voinov’s pieces have sharp or pointed objects as part of their composition: spears, swords, axes, razor blades, screwdrivers, shovels, picks, daggers, scissors,

⁶¹⁰ From an interview with the author at 53 Lgovskii Prospekt, 10 March 2007.

⁶¹¹ Emphasis in original. Aleksey Kurbanovsky, “The Struggle with Emptiness,” in Vadim Voinov, *A Convolute Monograph*, 30.

bayonets, and even mousetraps are included in his works, creating a palpable sense of danger. Because the items that Voinov chooses for his pieces have such an unbelievably “strong emotional aura,”⁶¹² it is impossible for the viewer not to react, not to enter into dialogue with the works.

Yet the employ of such everyday objects, while offering a profound resonance, also poses the threat of the “profanization of culture: the loss of the *message* in triviality, its sinkage in mud and garbage.”⁶¹³ Just as the Belomorkanal prisoners were portrayed as “worthless trash” in Stratanovskii’s verse and represented as actual refuse in Belov’s paintings, the mundane, ordinary object again rears its head in contemporary culture to provide commentary on the Stalinist past. There is a danger—one that becomes literal with the example of real-life cigarette packs—that the legacy of the Soviet experience will somehow become lost in the garbage dump of history, devoid of meaning and denied of articulation. Nevertheless, the significance in Voinov’s works stems not from the objects themselves, but rather from how they are placed in relationship to one another, which frees the assemblages from their individual components.

The importance of the inter-relationship between objects often necessitates a certain amount of deciphering. For example, the piece *Wounded Elephant in a Family Album* (*Ranennyi slon v semeinnom al'bome*, 1994) might at first seem to be related to the black elephant figurine that is placed in the center of the assemblage. Yet “elephant” in Russian is *slon*, which is also the acronym for the Solovki Gulag camps (*Solovetskie lageria osobogo naznacheniiia*, or SLON). The fractured pieces of photographs from the family album dissect the human figure; a head is upside down, legs are at a forty-five degree angle. The elephant in the center of the work has a hole in the middle of its chest, as if the animal had been shot with a bullet in an execution. The

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ Emphasis in original. Ibid.

artist renders physical violence pictorially in a similar way in *The Purge* (*Chistka*, 1992), which includes a group photograph—composed of individual, oval-shaped faces—that has been torn to pieces, with some visages missing altogether. Such violence can be represented by the selection of material as well as by the inclusion of particular objects; the title of the work itself invokes brutal associations. *Conditioned Reflex* (*Uslovnyi refleks*, 1991) contains the same type of group photographs, and although they are not torn into pieces, the presence of a metal chain encircling the pictures alludes to a sinister brutality. Voinov represents the violence of the Soviet experience with the physical dissection and reformulation of images. Just as Solovki is cast as an object via its name by using an elephant, so does Voinov use a cardboard cross in his piece on the *Kresty*, or Crosses, prison in St. Petersburg (*Tiur'ma "Kresty,"* 1982-1992). Demonstrating his understanding of the essentials of criminal life, the artist includes a few playing cards, a beard trimmer, a mess pan, and a scrap of paper in the assemblage.

Voinov's works often focus on the aspect of hard, physical labor in the Soviet Union by featuring picks, shovels, and construction projects. *The Difficulties of Growing Up* (*Trudnosti rosta*, 1980-1990) includes a spade and shovel alongside a typical, star-shaped communist pin; *Here's Your Shovel* (*Vot Vam lopata*, 2000) has a shovel—which the title itself makes clear—along with a poster, titled “The erection of the canal”; *The Pharaoh's Profile II* (*Profil' faraona*, 1984) assembles a cast-metal profile image of Stalin along with a pamphlet on the Cult of Personality and a worn, caked-with-dirt shovel;⁶¹⁴ *We Have Constructed* (*My postroili*, 1991) juxtaposes a poster of the same name with a cardboard container labeled “bricks,” a matchbox, and a spade; *Silhouette of a Proletarian* (*Siluet proletariia*, 1991) includes a physical wrench

⁶¹⁴ It is worth noting that in this piece Stalin is described as “pharaoh.” It is not the first time a reference to ancient Egypt is made in works regarding the White Sea-Baltic Canal; both prisoner-written (i.e., Stratanovskii's verse) and non-prisoner-written texts (i.e., the *History of the Construction*) make parallels between the construction of the Canal and the erection of the pyramids.

alongside the image of a factory worker ripped from sort of catalogue or publication; *Record* (*Rekord*, 1992), referring to shock-worker labor draws together a miniature pick-axe and a 1933 cover of the previously-discussed illustrated magazine *USSR under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*); the list could go on. The assemblage that most directly references Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal, entitled *Smoking Break* (*Perekur*, 1990) also includes the head of a shovel in reference to the physical labor undertaken to complete the project. Yet the title of this piece is perhaps even more significant; not only does Voinov use the title *Smoking Break*, but he also includes a crumpled pack of Belomorkanal cigarettes on top of a poster of the dams of the Moscow-Volga Canal. Once again, a pack of the infamous *papirosy*—and a crumpled pack, no less, making evident its status as a piece of refuse—becomes the focus of a contemporary art piece regarding the Canal.

The violence of Voinov's art pieces—demonstrated by both the frequent usage of sharp objects and the repeated slicing or cutting of the compositional materials that make up his assemblages—as well as the above-mentioned emphasis on physical labor in the Soviet Union foreground these two phenomena as key features of the artist's work. The reason for their centrality also stems from their inter-connection. Violence irrevocably changes the composition of the human body just as hard labor physically transforms it. The raw, visceral component of the Soviet experience bleeds through, with individuals not presented as distinct personalities, but rather as so many bits of garbage, forgotten, unwanted, and discarded. If we once again turn to the example of the Holocaust, we can see how different the Soviet jail experience is from its Nazi counterpart. In terms of the Holocaust, it is precisely the reclamation of the individual voice and individual lives that forms its most distinctive feature. Holocaust survivors travel to schools to tell their individual stories; oral histories are laboriously collected with financial

backing from Stephen Spielberg and others; at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., visitors are presented with an identity card of a specific Holocaust victim so that they can imagine their personal story and struggle. Soviet memory, on the other hand, is decidedly more collectively oriented, at least at this stage of its practice.

Voinov's assemblages, therefore, offer a type of subjectivity that is not entirely unrelated to the collective body that exists in the cultural narratives contemporaneous to the Canal project. The motifs of the Belomorkanal—the war against nature, utopian/dystopian space, collectivity, musicality—are not rejected but rather re-formulated. Instead of a re-claiming of the individual or a denigration of the project itself or its physical locale, there is the presence of a traumatized collective body and an emphasis on the actual spatial landscape of the Canal in contemporary works on the subject. Both of these features differentiate themselves from their earlier counterparts, however, with the introduction of violence. This is not a joyful collective working in the name of Soviet labor, but rather an abused and forgotten mass of humanity. This is not the glorious re-creation of the Canal landscape through photomontage, but rather the dissection and attenuation of the project's natural environment.

Once again, the performative element in all of these works becomes a central component and also links it with the earlier works about the Canal; here the element of trauma makes this notion of performance even more relevant, since an art work's attempt to address a past ordeal is a certain type of conscious memorialization. As Frances Guerin and Roger Halls suggest:

The act of bearing witness is not the communication of a truth that is already known, but its actual production through this performance act. In this process, the listener becomes a witness to the witness, not only facilitating the very possibility of testimony, but also subsequently sharing its burden. That is to say, the listener

assumes responsibility to perpetuate the imperative to bear witness to the historical trauma for the sake of collective memory.⁶¹⁵

In the representation of the traumatic event, therefore, the spectator of art plays a performative role just as the producer of art does. All of the works discussed here beg commentary from the viewer or reader; they prompt reaction and are not meant to be understood in a vacuum. In addition, while many of these objects can be found in traditional museums—such as Belov’s paintings or Voinov’s art pieces—they insistently employ the everyday in their constructions, another feature that draws them closer to the earlier cultural narratives from the Canal. The prisoners’ autobiographies, performance pieces, and fictional works are all examples of the most democratic type of artistic participation. Everyone could be an artist and was encouraged to try, just as the components of everyday life were to be used as the subject matter for the artworks themselves. The performance of identity in the earlier works as well as the performance of traumatic witness in the contemporary works adeptly embodies the paradoxes inherent in Stalinist culture. On the one hand, the notion of performance forwards the suggestion of a suspension of belief; one is merely play-acting. On the other hand, it is precisely through the physical act of such a performance that one is able to believe, or make others think that they themselves believe.

The performance of identity in a utopian/dystopian world is difficult to ascertain because it is not supposed to exist in the first place; subjectivity is based around the collective. Yet it is precisely the notion of performance that allows for the continuation of collective membership; as separate members of a chorus, an agitational brigade, an orchestra (or even as individual pieces of garbage), many separate personalities are condensed into a massive whole, and the many

⁶¹⁵ Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Figure and the Witness*, 11.

voices together as one make musical motifs central to this type of expression. The historical legacy of collectivism in Russian culture also contributes greatly to the production of such narratives. As the opening epigraph makes clear, the unwanted bits of humanity compress together into a whole, into a “cultural stratum,” that, despite its unsavory composition and forgotten existence, is a collective social force. Rather than refuting the turn towards collectivity that is at least in part a legacy from the Soviet past, it is possible to capitalize on this communal inheritance by employing as a creative drive and an inspiration for future artworks.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁶ The critic Mikhail Epstein explores the potential of collective creativity in his transcultural art experiments (including group essay writing), realizing “that Soviet culture, not in spite of, but *due to* its collectivist and totalitarian nature, possessed some creative potentials that had never been realized before.” Emphasis in original, *Transcultural Experiments*, 34.

5.0 CONTEXTS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 UTOPIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

This project began with the metaphorical space of laboratory and will end with the ideological space of utopia. The difference between these two terms might be seen as similar to the distinction between *doroga* (road) and *put'* (pathway) in Russian; while the former would quite practically and predictably lead you to a village or town, the latter could lead you to a fantastical, not-yet-realized world. While the space of the laboratory offers results and data, utopia fulfills dreams and worldviews. *Put'* and utopia bear a similar ideological charge.

At the same time, however, if we may mix such rigid oppositions, the realms of laboratory and utopia are not entirely different. Both present controlled, contained environments that are structured according to human design. Both promise a store of potential knowledge. What is begun as a test experiment in the lab can become societal trial in the utopia, with evolution from one to the other having a seemingly natural logic. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the Belomorkanal's isolated realm and the prisoners' (in theory) ideological education allowed the camp site to become a testing ground for socialist experiments. The prison camp more generally—with its barbed-wire fences, guard towers, and barracks walls—was precisely the kind of boundarized space required for the construction of utopia.

Utopias are often separated by walls, bodies of water, or fences; to guarantee a success, their space must be demarcated in a dramatic way from any potentially poisonous outside influences. In the chronotope of the utopia, time and space may undergo radical shifts. Time, so focused on a future agenda, loses its role in the present. As time shrinks and becomes less significant, space expands, clarifying the essential role geography plays in utopian constructs. This chronotope adeptly applies to the Belomorkanal's construction. The project is built in just twenty months, in what essentially violates presumed temporal restrictions and consistently emphasizes the future completion of the project. As time seems to shrink, the physical terrain of the construction grows ever larger. Chapter Three, on non-prisoner narratives, focuses closely on the geographical aspects of the Belomorkanal project. Explorations of the sketch genre, travel writing, and tourist guides help to magnify landscape's significance. Descriptions or hypothetical renderings of the natural environment provide the content of these texts, often with the help of montage. Whether it is the textual montage of the *History of the Construction*, the photomontages of Aleksandr Rodchenko, or the filmic montages of Aleksandr Lemberg, the style is vital in terms of geography because it allows for the creation of worlds that do not actually exist. For an ideological, propagandistic regime, montage offers unlimited potential for the fabrication of reality. The Belomorkanal does not exist as it is portrayed on page and press, stage and screen—most would claim it is more of a killing field than a site of human transformation—and so this imaginary world, this utopia or “no place,” had to be invented with the help of aesthetic and literary techniques, as the previous chapters have demonstrated. In shifting from text to reality, from inspiration to construction, montage becomes assemblage: the three-dimensional assembly of the Canal itself, the various elements of dams, locks, and dikes that are pieced together to form a continuous waterway.

There are many instances of the Soviet Union's utopian experiments besides Gulag camps. The official creation in 1934, for example, of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan,⁶¹⁷ was designed for Soviet Jews to resettle in a new "homeland" that would become their national territory. Even the 1936 creation of ethnic republics (in accordance with the Stalin constitution) in Central Asia represents an experiment in utopian society-building—the assignment of both people and place according to a larger ideological, philosophical design. Many scholars, in turn, choose to interpret the Soviet Union itself as a type of failed utopian experiment; Mikhail Epstein calls communism "the most extraordinary utopia of the past."⁶¹⁸ The inability to travel freely outside of the Soviet Union and its stringently controlled borders create the strict physical demarcation of space that is a frequent precondition for utopia's existence.

Because of its tendency for isolation, utopian space often exists on the margins; like the prison camp, it typically occupies an isolated border region or boundary. Despite the traditional academic focus on centralization—with great urban centers and capitals as the generators of culture—recent scholarly studies have argued for the importance of the periphery in the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union, since "decentralization and mobility were conceptual and aesthetic imperatives [...] They were means of liberating vision and, by association, experience from the static, hierarchical control of bourgeois civilization."⁶¹⁹

Coupled with the essential role of geography in the utopian construct is its other primary ingredient: people. The philosophical rationale or impetus for the creation of a utopia unites

⁶¹⁷ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley, U California P, 1998).

⁶¹⁸ Mikhail Epstein and Ellen Berry, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (NY: St. Martin's P, 1999), 44.

⁶¹⁹ Emma Widdis, "To Explore or Conquer? Mobile Perspectives on the Soviet Cultural Revolution," *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: U Washington P, 2003), 219-40, 222.

these two key components—place and people—by infusing geography and inhabitants alike with ideology. Chapter Two, prisoner narratives, focuses more closely on the people who inhabited the utopian world of the Belomorkanal construction. Murderers and historians, criminals and intelligentsia, performers and writers—the diversity of the population building the Canal becomes apparent by way of the prisoners’ artistic contributions and life stories. These glimpses of the inhabitants of the Gulag, often in the form of autobiography, illuminate many different aspects of the Soviet camps during the Stalinist period: the importance of artistic participation, the substitution of the state for the natural family, the emphasis on the morally galvanizing power of physical labor. Most importantly, however, the analysis of these life stories in the previous chapters demonstrates the absolutely essential ideological ingredient of *perekovka*, or re-forging.

Perekovka functions as a redemptive phenomenon at the Belomorkanal; those who have gone astray from the proper Soviet *put'* are given the opportunity to re-fashion themselves with the twin tools of socialist education and physical labor. I have demonstrated how this promise facilitates the depiction of the camp as a “factory of life,” where people are created alongside the feats of industry included in Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan. Marina Balina claims that utopia resides always in the landscape of the future, where there is no horizon and no opposition between past and present. This space, Balina would assert, is where life is made.⁶²⁰ But rather than the symbolist phraseology of *tvorenie zhizni*,⁶²¹ I believe this phenomenon could more adeptly be described by the futurist notion of *zhiznestroenie*, or life-building. Instead of being created, the prisoners’ new lives at the Belomorkanal are constructed or built. Life-construction captures the sense of industry so important in the notion of *perekovka*, and it also introduces

⁶²⁰ Balina, “Literatura puteshestvii,” 899.

⁶²¹ See Chapter Two for an assessment of the construct of life-creation and its importance to the symbolist movement.

aspects of the futurist movement's ethos, which plays an absolutely essential role in the development of creative life at the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Two of the most visible artistic personalities who serve time at the Canal—Igor' Terent'ev and Sergei Alymov—have direct ties to the futurist movement.

Just as a focus on geography allows for the Soviet “war against nature” (highlighted in Chapters One and Three) to become apparent, so does a concentration on the people who inhabit the utopian landscape permit the philosophy of *perekovka* to emerge as the project's ethos. The struggle to master nature and the fight to re-create people are the twin ideological battles waged on the banks of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, representing the two components of landscape and people that are the key ingredients of a utopia. The shift from montage to assemblage becomes possible in terms of both geography and people; the diversity of the camp's population assures a kind of three-dimensional collage, with prisoners from all types of backgrounds united into one “family,”⁶²² simultaneously waging the war against nature and the struggle to transmogrify their internal contents. The complex network of cultural interconnections among the various media, artists, and texts produced at the Belomorkanal—as well as their contemporary echoes—more closely follow the pattern of a rhizome than a root; diffuse and multifarious rather than hierarchical and successive, with the technique of assemblage as the most appropriate method for encapsulating such a model.

Since assemblage is primarily an artistic term, it is particularly adept in capturing the Belomorkanal's cultural practices—the radical transformations occurring at the camp site are

⁶²² The issue of the family has always been a dilemma in utopian constructs, since an allegiance to the state must be substituted for more traditional biological ties. Often, the duties of raising children become communal so as to dissolve familial relations. In the Soviet Union, the notion of the workers' “family” (see Chapter Two, pages 46-50 and 60) at this time period served as a replacement for the traditional family. Later, the state—and Stalin himself—will be presented as the “great family” (see chapter five of Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*), displacing the notion of a communal, workers' family for a more imperialist vision.

possible only because of the revolutionizing potential of art. The Canal's completion is a body of work; it is the outcome of a motivational *oeuvre*, and literal bodies are contained within its construction. Bearing in mind that Stalinism has been described as the “lethal aestheticization of life,”⁶²³ the creative participation intended both to facilitate and to express the radical transformation of people and place can be read as inherently dangerous. Songs claiming victory in the “war against nature” actually testify to the rape of the natural environment⁶²⁴; poetry in honor of the re-forged criminal may precede a death sentence.⁶²⁵ While there is a certain amount of violence in prisoner and non-prisoner texts written during the time period of the Canal's construction, this brutality becomes more vivid in contemporary cultural products related to the Belomorkanal, as shown with the artworks discussed in Chapter Four. Even when not directly stated—as the case with the health-damaging products of alcohol and tobacco that carry the Belomorkanal brand name—an undercurrent of destructive potential is present in modern manifestations of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

During the course of this research, the differing techniques of collage and montage have been subsumed by the overarching notion of assemblage, with this latter term embodying the fullest extent of three-dimensionality as well as a characteristic of collectivity. Collage exemplifies much of the artwork included in Chapter Two of prisoner narratives, whereas montage most directly relates to the non-prisoner narratives contained in Chapter Three. These allocations can be understood by the applicability of the technique to the respective demographic. The prisoners were piecing together their lives after they had been violently

⁶²³ Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: U Washington P, 2003), xiv (from introduction by Naiman).

⁶²⁴ A particularly successful artistic treatment of this phenomenon is the nature writer and sketch artist Mikhail Prishvin's *The Tsar's Road* (*Osudareva doroga*, 1957), which treats the detrimental effects the building of the Canal had on Karelia's natural environment.

⁶²⁵ As is the case with Igor' Terent'ev, who, despite his formulation of pro-Soviet agitational songs and performances, was executed after participating in the construction of both the Belomor and Moscow-Volga Canals.

ripped out of their home environments, just as they were now being spliced together with other convicts to create a collective mass toiling for the construction of socialism. The metaphorical importance of collage to the prisoner population also elucidates the significance of the chorus, orchestra, and auditory themes that have been discussed throughout this project. Like voices in a chorus or instruments in an orchestra, separate—and disparate—prisoner experiences were strung together to create a unified melody.⁶²⁶

Montage subsequently goes a step further by not just assembling random fragments but systematically realigning them to create an unreal world that appears factual, as with Lemberg's documentary films or Rodchenko's photomontages. This technique, therefore, is ideal for the non-prisoner narratives as it allows for the design of a fantastical, utopian realm. In Chapter Four, the style of assemblage becomes most relevant and, in turn, becomes emblematic of the Canal project as a whole. Not only does Voinov employ assemblage in his art pieces, but assemblage serves as a metaphor for the collective. The locks, dams, and dikes forming the White Sea-Baltic Canal are a smaller assemblage contained within one much larger that allows for the projection of Moscow as the port of five seas.

As Chapter Four argues, collectivity in contemporary Russian art has not been abandoned but rather re-imagined, offering avenues of exploration for artists that do not need to break entirely with the past. It therefore seems particularly appropriate that one of the main artists discussed in Chapter Four, Vadim Voinov, employs the technique of assemblage for his Soviet-themed art pieces. Although he and others refer to these works as collage, the term assemblage is more appropriate, given the three-dimensionality of these pieces. Instead of ignoring or

⁶²⁶ Other prominent Gulag-related texts use the motif of the chorus; for example, Andrei Siniavskii's well-known Gulag work *A Voice from the Chorus* (*Golos iz khora*, 1973), in which various prisoners are figured as a continuous alternation of voices, forming an odd and disparate choir.

refuting the Soviet past, Voinov (literally) uses pieces of it to create a sense of shared history, an invisible collectivity among viewers who can identify—and make associations with—the components in their composition. The production of these artworks attests to what Mikhail Epstein would call the “lyrical value” of everyday objects and the human life that is preserved within them.⁶²⁷ Assemblage, therefore, emerges as the most adept style not only for expressing the people and place of utopia but also for contemporary manifestations of the Soviet past.

Water commonly serves as a divider of utopian space. The White Sea-Baltic Canal is a waterway, and a fixation on its liquid contents would be expected. Yet this emphasis on water reaches beyond the Belomorkanal experience and into the Soviet literary arena of the late 1920s and early 1930s as a whole. This phenomenon is apparent with the LEF group of artists whose member Nikolai Chuzak (the main theorizer of *zhiznestroenie*, or life-building) describes the organization’s demise in the late 1920s as a river stopping short of the sea; a grave problem, since they are worth nothing if they “do not flow into the sea—the sea of massive dimensions.”⁶²⁸ Viktor Shklovskii claims in 1933 that the writer must absorb water in order to express themselves artistically,⁶²⁹ and the philosopher Aleksandr Meier writes at length about the philosophical resonance of water during his imprisonment at the White Sea-Baltic Canal.⁶³⁰ The *Russian-language* term utopia itself alludes to water and its lethal potential; an article on the White Sea-Baltic Canal in the Russian travel journal *Around the World* (*Vokrug sveta*) astutely acknowledges the false but evocative etymological link between the words in Russian for utopia (*utopia*) and to drown (*utopit*), advising the reader to think of this connection the next time they

⁶²⁷ Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: U Massachusetts P, 1995), 254.

⁶²⁸ «А грош нам цена, если мы не впадем в море – в море массовости,» N. F. Chuzak, (*Literatura fakta*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972), 269.

⁶²⁹ See Chapter One, page 16.

⁶³⁰ See Chapter Four, pages 209-10.

hold a pack of Belomorkanal cigarettes in their hands.⁶³¹ Water is not only a life force, a symbol of creative energy and vitality, but it is also capable of destruction—drowning, flooding, inundating.

Stalin himself was reported to have had a particular obsession with water, with his favorite film being Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1938 river-based musical *Volga-Volga*.⁶³² This fascination played itself out in the urban capital of the Soviet Union, since "water was perceived in the 1930s as a sacred and powerful element, as the basis of existence" and "the cult of water could be seen in the numerous ponds and fountains that mushroomed all over Moscow" and "in the provision of the General Plan to concentrate major architectural objects on the banks of the Moscow River."⁶³³ In regards to the loss of life at the Moscow-Volga Canal, Stalin downplayed the high fatality rates, claiming that "man after all is mortal" but "the canal would last forever."⁶³⁴ Water formed a central motif not only in the *History of the Construction*, but in many production novels and stories of the 1920s and 1930s: Andrei Platonov's "The Epiphany Locks" (*Epifanskie shliuzy*, 1927); Leonid Leonov's *Soviet River* (*Sot'*, 1930); Boris Pil'niak's *The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea* (*Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more*, 1930); and Marietta Shaginian's *Hydro-central* (*Gidrotsentral'*, 1931). Even the most famous book in all of Gulag literature—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag GULag, 1918-1956*, 1973-75)—employed a water-based metaphor in its conceptualization of the prison camps.

One of the most dramatic attempts to control water, master nature, and create the aesthetically beautiful occurred in the eighteenth century with Peter the Great's founding of St.

⁶³¹ *Vokrug sveta*, <http://www.vokrugsveta.com/body/zemla/belomor.htm>, 7 February 2010.

⁶³² Andrew Horton, *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 75. Beyond just mere film preferences, Paperny (see note 19) also argues for the connection between Stalin and water.

⁶³³ V. Paperny, "Moscow in the 1930s and the Emergence of a New City," *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, Ed. Hans Günther (NY: St. Martin's P, 1990), 229-39, 232.

⁶³⁴ Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991* (London: Longman, 1993), 106.

Petersburg. This grandiose project had much in common with the Belomorkanal experience: the struggle to control a wet, natural environment in an isolated and nearly unpopulated northern location; the sacrifice of thousands of lives in the name of a culturally significant project meant to swell national pride; the presence of a great, larger-than-life personality who serves as the construction's namesake; the use of primitive tools to build a grand design; a rationalist, utopian vision applied to a landscape with dramatic consequences. In addition, Peter had already envisioned a waterway along the current route of the Belomorkanal, nicknamed the "Tsar's Road" for his land overhaul of ships along this passage. The city itself was designed around a series of Canals and employed Karelian granite for its river banks, with the end result a composition of "water, stone and sky."⁶³⁵

St. Petersburg is commonly described as a city built on bones, just as the White Sea-Baltic Canal is often called a road of bones. Despite the high rate of mortality and insistent force of a despotic leader in both projects, the violence inherent in the building of St. Petersburg has receded into the background. Although Aleksandr Pushkin's classic poem "The Bronze Horseman" (*Mednyi vsadnik*, 1833) includes a devastating flood, Fedor Dostoevskii's Raskolnikov peers into watery canals before committing his murderous act in *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), and Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg* (*Peterburg*, 1913-14) forecasts doom, most often St. Petersburg is celebrated for its beauty, art, and culture—not for its death or destruction. Despite the fact that the site of its construction was not an actual prison camp *per se* (although prisoners were certainly used as laborers), the key difference is that St. Petersburg was ultimately a success, whereas the White Sea-Baltic Canal was not. People can visit St. Petersburg and marvel at its Italian-inspired architecture, they can roam its romantic,

⁶³⁵ Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (NY: Picador, 2002), 8.

winding streets and graceful bridges, they can celebrate its beautiful white nights. The Belomorkanal, on the other hand is too shallow and too narrow; it is barely used and virtually never visited by tourists. It is a scar on the landscape and a place people forget, even when smoking cigarettes or drinking vodka named after the project.

The commonalities between the two construction projects allow for a continuous model of history rather than one that abruptly shifts after the 1917 revolution. A prisoner in Krasnodar draws a similar conclusion while being interviewed for the documentary film *Stalin Is with Us* (*Stalin s nami*, 1988). He claims that Genghis Khan, Peter the Great, and Stalin are all the same, that they all drowned and crushed people, in particular Peter the Great in the swamps of current-day St. Petersburg and Stalin with his White Sea-Baltic Canal.⁶³⁶ Like the Belomorkanal, St. Petersburg is both “a utopian ideal city of the future, the embodiment of Reason, and [...] a terrible masquerade of the Antichrist.”⁶³⁷ Also like the Canal project, “the city is a complex semiotic mechanism, a culture-generator, but it carries out this function only because it is a melting-pot of texts and codes, belonging to all kinds of languages and levels.”⁶³⁸ Before St. Petersburg is completed, it is a blank slate upon which history can be written just as Karelia is a remote locale where nature and man can be re-fashioned according to emerging societal requirements. This lends St. Petersburg a theatrical quality not unlike the Belomorkanal project, and early visitors note its performative quality, as if the metropolis were merely a giant stage set.⁶³⁹

⁶³⁶ Tofik Shakhverdiev, dir., *Stalin Is with Us* (*Stalin s nami*), 1988.

⁶³⁷ Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 194.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 8.

In reality, the construction of the White-Baltic Sea represents a dystopia, and it is often that a utopian vision morphs into the inverse. Utopias and dystopias, therefore, are intimately related despite semantically being the opposite of one another. This is true in literature as well, with works like Andrei Platonov's *Foundation Pit* (*Kotlovan*, 1930) being defined as both a utopian and dystopian novel.⁶⁴⁰ The closeness between the potential of a fulfilled dream and the disillusion of a realized nightmare is precisely what creates the element of the absurd that runs throughout the Belomorkanal project. What is supposed to be a creative force is actually a destructive one; what is supposed to be an aesthetic revolution becomes a violent one.

Is there any promise, therefore, for utopia as a construct? Is there any possibility of its resurrection given all of its many past, miserable failures? While the contemporary critic Mikhail Epstein claims that it is time to move beyond utopia and its subsequent parodies,⁶⁴¹ he nevertheless argues that it is still a viable category, since some have tried to “create a utopia of the ordinary rather than to reject utopianism as such.”⁶⁴² Just as there is hope for the collective to be re-claimed as an important artistic and societal feature in contemporary Russian culture, so too, perhaps utopia can offer a pathway for the future, but only if it is radically transformed.

5.2 PERFORMING FOR STALIN

In analyzing propagandistic materials, the contemporary researcher is faced with a dilemma—how can we accept zealous statements of allegiance to socialist ideals when they are written

⁶⁴⁰ See introduction, Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit* (London: Harvill P, 1973).

⁶⁴¹ Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future*, 330. Interestingly, Epstein also argues here that Postmodernism itself is the last great utopia, that in rejecting the notion it appropriated it is actually more utopian than all previous utopias, as it represents an eternal present.

⁶⁴² Epstein, *After the Future*, 44.

within the confines of a hard-labor work camp? Yet how can we entirely reject them when there is evidence that such fervor for the administration did exist and that prisoners had numerous motivational factors spurring them to work and affirm their dedication? In the end, all texts are products of some sort of ideology; no work is created in a vacuum, but rather emerges from the cultural context in which it was written. To ignore works like the *History of the Construction* because they are highly ideological or to dismiss prisoner-written biographies as non-genuine propaganda—which has long been the attitude to works regarding the White Sea-Baltic Canal—entirely misses the point. These texts, like any others, are cultural artifacts from the time period in which they were produced, historical fossils that yield important revelations upon close study.

I have argued here that what occurred on the banks of the Canal was a type of performance, an act of identity that—once performed numerous times—could come to be believed by the actors themselves, blurring the line between illusion and reality. Mere existence in the Soviet Union could often take on this guise of performance, since in Stalinist culture “survival and success depended on one’s skills in ideological navigation, on being able to make one’s way through a world that existed on the plane of representation and imagination, a plane that exerted a type of asymptotic and symptomatic pressure on the surface of everyday life.”⁶⁴³ The key to surviving Stalinism, therefore, rested upon one’s success as an actor.

Just as people in the Soviet Union as a whole struggled with one another for better jobs, bigger apartments, and Party membership, this competition was mirrored inside the Gulag with the phenomenon of *udarnichestvo* and its demands to continuously outdo previous work norms. *Udarnichestvo* became all the more popular after Aleksei Stakhanov’s mining feat in 1935, an achievement that spurred a burgeoning movement in his name, dedicated to the over-fulfillment

⁶⁴³ Dobrenko and Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism*, Naiman introduction, xi.

of work norms. The development of shock-worker labor at the Belomorkanal directly foreshadowed future social developments in the Soviet Union, as addressed in Chapter One. Although the concept was not created at the White Sea-Baltic Canal,⁶⁴⁴ the project's construction arguably witnessed its rapid growth and systemization. The importance of the *udarnichestvo* phenomenon cannot be overstated in terms of the Canal project; one's labor output was one's meal ticket, and the *udarniki* received numerous special privileges. Countless poetic works and articles were devoted to the shock-workers and their abilities, slogans and banners reminded everyone of their presence.

The shock-worker concept also provided a bridge between the individual and the collective; although an *udarnik* may be honored specifically by name, his achievements were possible only within the context of the working masses and the brigade that helped him to outperform other workers. As a Soviet publication assessing the legacy of the first Five-Year Plan explained, shock-worker labor is “a summons to pleasurable, cheerful work, in the name of a glorious goal, where the little ‘I’ becomes just as proud and significant as the big ‘we.’”⁶⁴⁵ The emphasis on the individual achievements of the shock-workers—their specific names were written on billboards, they were individually assigned prizes—reformulates the issue of constructed subjectivity within the framework of the collective.

In addition to Soviet citizens more generally performing their identity during Stalinism in order to procure privileges, the criminals at the Belomorkanal often describe their former trades as a performative act and with an artistic flair, as if actors on a stage. One female criminal

⁶⁴⁴ The first *udarnik* brigades were in the Donbas coal mining region in 1926-27. N. V. Primush, *Udarnichestvo: Mif i real'nost'* (Donetsk: Donbas, 1990), 11.

⁶⁴⁵ «Это вызов на радостный веселый труд, на славу целого, где маленькое «я» становится таким же гордым и значительным, как большое «мы.» В. G. Panteleimonov, *U podnozhiiia promyshlennoi piatiletki “udarnichestvo”* (Paris: Soiuz Sovetskikh Patriotov, 1945), 31.

laments the fact that she can no longer ply her trade with confidence because she cannot afford the expensive clothes—that is, the costume—necessary for the performance of thief, and a criminal in RUR discusses the art of being a pickpocket (*karmannik*) as the most “clever” of all types of theft (*samaia umstvennaia krazha*).⁶⁴⁶ The element of show is absolutely vital for the prisoners’ trades, and the artistic component of transgression has been an important aspect of this research, as it draws more closely together the aesthetic and criminal realms. As Andrei Siniavskii writes in his semi-autobiographical Gulag monograph *A Voice from the Chorus* (*Golos iz khora*, 1973):

In theory one would think that power belongs to brute force. In fact, this is not the case at all: power is wielded by the magician, by the man with the subtle sleight of hand. It belongs to the light-fingered cutpurse. Power belongs to art. Almost as in the case of poets, what counts most in the thieves’ code of behaviour is style, the ability to project one’s personality in terms of show, spectacle.⁶⁴⁷

In this passage, the distinction between the artist and the criminal are collapsed—and both wield a surprising amount of power. In the case of the criminal population at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, this potential for power is augmented by the fact that the prisoners could perform their thieving trades as well as participate in artistic projects.⁶⁴⁸ As the Bakhtin epigraph opening this chapter asserts, crime is an inherently public act; it brings a moment of privacy onto the street, in turn creating a need for spectators. The parallel drawn between St.

⁶⁴⁶ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 31, l. 35.

⁶⁴⁷ Abram Terts/Andrei Siniavskii, «Казалось бы: кто сильнее – у того и власть. Ничего подобного: власть в руках чародея. С тонкой инструментровкой в пальцах.» *Golos iz khora. Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Start, 1992), 543. English translation from: Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky), *A Voice from the Chorus*, trans. Kyril Fitzlyon and Max Hayward (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 147.

⁶⁴⁸ Many criminals were able to continue stealing while in prison, whether it was from fellow prisoners within the barracks or by going into Povenets and using their thieving skills there in order to rob new arrivals to the area (see Chapter Two, page 130).

Petersburg and the Belomorkanal in the last section is also relevant within the context of performance, since, as some scholars claim, the rationally planned city has the appearance of a grand stage set and is inherently theatrical in its design.⁶⁴⁹ Even the shock-worker autobiographies represent a type of performance, since “writing trauma is often seen in terms of enacting it, which may at times be equated with acting (or playing) it out in performative discourse or artistic practice.”⁶⁵⁰ In our contemporary society, crime is increasingly figured as a commodity, a product willingly consumed by an eager public, like spectators at a carnival.⁶⁵¹

The metaphor of the foxtrot, which the philosopher Lev Losev uses in his short story “From a Conversation at the Belomor Construction” (*Iz razgovora na Belomorstroe*, 1932-33), describes how prisoners’ work on the Canal has a direct connection to the performance of selfhood. The prisoners, as Losev’s short story claims, were energetically “dancing” on the outside, but empty and soulless on the inside:

We and our work are a foxtrot. We are cheerful, joyful, alive; our tempo is jerky, garish, against any type of lethargy. But on the inside we are empty, we don’t believe in anything, we mock and deride everything. We don’t care about what we sign or what we vote for. We are sluggish, anarchist, profligate. We become numb, tremble, lisp; and everything there, in the depths, is rickety, corrupt, everything crawls, sticks, languishes sickly, aches, suffers dissolutely, laughs at its own weakness and solitude. The colossal energy of the Belomor construction is our intellectual and technical-expressive, industrial and social foxtrot. Our rhythm is buoyant, fresh, young; and our souls are empty, anarchistic, and

⁶⁴⁹ Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 197.

⁶⁵⁰ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 186-87.

⁶⁵¹ See Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (NY: Routledge, 2000).

profligate. For us at Belomorstroi it's tedious, cheerful, frightening, hysterical, joyful, empty, profligate!...⁶⁵²

Losev's description interweaves two seemingly incongruous qualities—especially in the last sentence with the alternating valences of the string of adjectives—suffering and joyfulness. While the prisoners are cheerful on the outside, they are disintegrating on the inside. Productive work again becomes a type of performance, one whose cheap mendacity puts into ever greater relief the magnitude of human pain.

The foxtrot metaphor was complex and far-reaching; not only did it appear in many other Soviet literary works both related and unrelated to the Canal, but it was also emblematic of modernism itself. The dance symbolized the “decadence” of the West, and the allure of its profanity allowed for its popularity in the Soviet Union. As an American traveler in 1920s Moscow noted (in his appropriately-titled monograph *The Reforging of Russia*), “From ballet dancers to former princesses, former manufacturers’ daughters to former janitors’ daughters, every girl in Moscow has one great social ambition—to learn to fox-trot.”⁶⁵³ Hullinger asserted that the cabarets and cafes of the early 1920s were packed with foxtrotters, thanks to the introduction of the dance by American relief workers.⁶⁵⁴ The dance was so popular that one concerned observer claimed it happened everywhere except on public transportation and in

⁶⁵² «Мы и наша работа – фокстрот. Мы – бодры, веселы, живы; наши темпы – резкие, броские, противоположность всякой вялости. Но внутри себя мы – пусты, ни во что не верим, над всем глумимся и издеваемся. Нам все равно что подписывать и за что голосовать. Мы – вялы, анархичны, развратны; мы млеем, дрожим, сюсюкаем; и все там, в глубине, расхлябанно, растленно, все ползет, липнет, болезненно млеет, ноет, развратно томится, смеется над собственным бессилием и одиночеством. Беломорстрой, вся эта колоссальная энергия строителей, это – наш интеллектуальный и технически-выразительный, производственный и социальный фокстрот. Наша ритмика – бодрая, свежая, молодая; и наши души – пусты, анархичны и развратны. У нас на Беломорстрое – томительно, бодро, жутко, надрывно, весело, пусто, развратно!...» Losev, *Zhizn': Povesti, rasskazy, pis'ma*, 334.

⁶⁵³ Edwin Ware Hullinger, *The Reforging of Russia* (NY: Dutton, 1925), 319.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

graveyards.⁶⁵⁵ Some explained that their passion for the dance stemmed from a desire to escape the bleak realities of the revolution and civil war they had just lived through; as one girl explained to Hullinger, “I am now trying to live on the surface of life [...] I have been in the depths for five years. Now I am going to be superficial. It hurts less.”⁶⁵⁶ Just like Losev’s description of the dance, the foxtrot was all surface, meaningless, performance, making it an apt metaphor for the role-playing of subjectivity at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where many prisoners acted a certain part either to obtain privileges or because of ideological indoctrination.

Although the foxtrot was eventually outlawed in the Soviet Union because of its supposed “bourgeois” tendencies, not everyone agreed that the dance and building socialism were entirely incompatible.⁶⁵⁷ As a reflection of its popularity, the foxtrot appeared in numerous literary works during the 1920s, including Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *Master and Margarita* (1928-40), Il’ia Erenburg’s novel *Trest D. E.* (1923), and Vladimir Maiakovskii’s play *Bedbug* (*Klop*, 1928). In Maiakovskii’s *Bedbug*, the main character Prisyppkin—an avid foxtrotter—claims he cannot possibly change society if he is forbidden to dance.⁶⁵⁸ Prisyppkin, like the dance itself in Soviet society, must be removed from the cultural arena only to re-appear later as farce. In 1935, however, the regime’s attitude towards the dance softened, and official protocol claimed that the dance should be neither forbidden nor propagandized.⁶⁵⁹

Just as metaphorical performance—whether in the guise of a criminal trade, labor-related foxtrot, or spectacle of subjectivity—was ubiquitous at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, so did literal

⁶⁵⁵ Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000), 121.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid, 323.

⁶⁵⁷ Anne E. Gorsuch, “Flappers and Foxtrotters: Soviet Youth in the ‘Roaring Twenties’,” *Carl Beck Papers* 1102 (1994): 1-33, 12.

⁶⁵⁸ V. V. Maiakovskii, *Klop* (Moscow: Slovo, 1999), 462-506, 497.

⁶⁵⁹ “TsK profsoiuza rabotnikov iskusstva. Protokol soveshchaniia ot 28 avgusta 1935 g. Po voprosu o zapadnykh tantsakh,” <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/hd/2005/hd.010105.asp>, 8 March 2010.

performance play an absolutely crucial role in the cultural arena. While these performances could take the form of *agitbrigady* or formal theatre productions, the most commonly mentioned kind of performance is that of orchestra. Perhaps the best-recognized image from the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal is Aleksandr Rodchenko's photograph of an orchestra playing within one of the lock's chambers, as it so adeptly captured the paradoxical nature of the project's propaganda. Yet this photograph, unlike many other of Rodchenko's photomontages, was not posed or manipulated; in their autobiographies and reminiscences, many prisoners mentioned the orchestral accompaniment to their work as a particularly vivid memory. Sergei Alymov discussed the strange acoustics of the music within a frozen chamber⁶⁶⁰ and the Belomor "symphony" (*simfoniia*) that included both stringed instruments and loud explosions to create the unique "voice" (*golos*) of the construction.⁶⁶¹ Vlasa Kirichenko, a mother of three and prisoner sentenced under article 58, recalled in her autobiography the orchestra playing and claimed it made the work "much more cheerful" (*rabotat' stalo eshche veselee*),⁶⁶² an echo of Stalin's famous statement, "life has become better, life has become more joyful" (*zhit' stalo luchshe, zhit' stalo veselei*).⁶⁶³ Non-prisoner texts discussed in this research also highlight the presence of stringed instruments; Pogodin's play *The Aristocrats* ends with a soaring melody and the Belomorkanal-themed issue of the magazine *USSR under Construction* showcases the orchestral presence at the construction site.

Music was important to the project not only because it exemplifies performance and crystallizes the auditory motifs so frequently employed as devices in Canal-related artistic works,

⁶⁶⁰ RGALI f. 1885, op. 5, d. 22, l. 4.

⁶⁶¹ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 21, l. 24.

⁶⁶² GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 152.

⁶⁶³ Stalin famously made this statement in regard to the creation of the 1936 constitution, which was supposed to promise the Soviet citizen a better life. Some five years earlier, the prisoner's statement eerily prefigures what is to become a kind of national slogan.

but also because music and physical labor often fuse, echoing each other's melodies. Vera Inber, who visited the Canal and participated in the collectively-written *History of the Construction*, noted in her diary Gor'kii's understanding of the music-labor connection, "The continuousness of human efforts during work processes and their rhythms he compares with music. The human collective, united by a common, goal-oriented task, is perceived by Gor'kii as its own type of orchestra, where everything is subordinated to the whole. The grand symphony of labor captures Gor'kii."⁶⁶⁴ The rhythm of labor as the rhythm of performance perhaps explains why musical bands played a role in many other prisons in the Soviet Union, in addition to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. The memory of musical accompaniment in the Gulag made an indelible impression on the American Alexander Dolgun when he was in a Kazakhstan prison camp:

I began to feel as though I was hallucinating again because I could hear music, a band, playing some kind of bravura march. It sounded weak and the instruments were not well tuned, but the rhythm was fast and I was sure it was coming from inside the gate. I had a sense of deep cosmic horror that made me dizzy. In the distance I could see the silhouette of the corpses on the wagon. The band seemed to be playing some kind of grotesque farewell. Then it got worse. Out of the gate came, in lines of five abreast, a column of *walking* corpses in black cotton jackets with white number patches [...] The band kept playing.⁶⁶⁵

The juxtaposition of cheery, fast-paced music with the sagging frames of the prisoners makes a particularly horrific impression. The documentary film *Stalin Is with Us* (*Stalin s nami*,

⁶⁶⁴ «Слитность человеческих усилий во время трудовых процессов, их ритмы он сравнивает с музыкой. Человеческий коллектив, спаянный общим целевым заданием, воспринимается Горьким как своего рода оркестр, где все подчинено целому. Великая симфония труда покоряет Горького.» Vera Inber, *Za mnogo let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1964), 170-71.

⁶⁶⁵ Alexander Dolgun and Patrick Watson, *Alexander Dolgun's Story: An American in the Gulag* (NY: Knopf, 1975), 164. Emphasis in original.

1989) includes a small trumpet group performing as prisoners nonchalantly walk by in a Krasnodar jail, allowing the contemporary viewer to understand the incongruity of such a tableau.⁶⁶⁶

However bizarre, this absurdity was an integral part of the camp system and precisely exemplified the penal philosophy of the Gulag. In the aforementioned documentary film *Stalin Is With Us*, the prisoners did not seem at all surprised by the presence of a brass band in the prison's courtyard; instead, they were much more interested in the camera that was filming them. Even though the presence of an orchestra created a strange, almost cultured, atmosphere in a landscape of death, its rhythms were intended to facilitate the work process—the act is a performance, similar to the prisoners' staging their subjectivity. As the opening epigraph to this chapter indicates, the site of the prison camp, with its exaggerated, unnatural relationships became a “theater of the absurd” in which the performance of the nonsensical becomes an everyday affair. In another example of human assemblage, the various parts of the orchestra must be pieced together by different musicians and different instruments, creating a harmonious whole from disparate parts. The popularity and development of the chorus as a traditional feature of Russian culture⁶⁶⁷ had similarities with the ubiquitous presence of the orchestra in Gulag camps; both musical phenomena relied on the participation of individual members in order to create a homogeneous, unified voice.

The absurd—earlier discussed in terms of the utopian/dystopian divide—also relates directly to performance. If identity itself is a type of performance, the separation between the actor and his show was what caused a disruption in the seamlessness of reality, forcing the

⁶⁶⁶Tofik Shakhverdiev, dir., *Stalin s nami?*, 1989.

⁶⁶⁷Orthodoxy's ban on instrumental music greatly contributed to the extensive development of the choir in Russian culture. See Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance : A Cultural History of Russia* (NY: Picador, 2002), 298.

performer to feel as if his or her existence in the world were but a mere absurdity. As the French existentialist Albert Camus argues, “this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his décor, is precisely the feeling of absurdity.”⁶⁶⁸ Once the absurdity of life is believed, Camus continues, one possible solution to this sense of unease about the strangeness of the world is suicide.⁶⁶⁹ Some contemporary historians claim that the assessment of the Soviet Union’s legacy is much more difficult to address than that of Germany’s relationship to Hitler, since “we killed one another, killed ourselves.”⁶⁷⁰

Some would argue that many of those incarcerated at the White Sea-Baltic Canal were forced to their own suicides by the relentless pace of work in the subzero temperatures of Karelia. As Iosif Kitchner asserted in his short story, the prisoners themselves were to blame for not speaking out and contesting the regime, instead acquiescing silently and therefore marching towards their own deaths.⁶⁷¹ Although the notion of “sheep being led to the slaughter” is a common assertion (and criticism) made in the context of Holocaust victims, such a claim is rarely made in terms of the Gulag. The relatively small number of Gulag revolts is even more surprising when it is taken into account that prisoners in the Soviet Union often had more opportunities for protest, since full-out extermination was never the ultimate goal of the Gulag and collaboration, communication, and organization among prisoners were often possible.⁶⁷²

This is not meant to imply, however, that there was no dissent on the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Perhaps the most visible example of prisoner non-compliance was made apparent by the

⁶⁶⁸ “Ce divorce entre l’homme et sa vie, l’acteur et son décor, c’est proprement le sentiment de l’absurdité,” *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 20. Translation mine.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁷⁰ «Но главным образом мы убивали друг друга, убивали себя.» Aleksandr Daniel', “Tema GULAGa. Znachimoe otsutstvie,” *Iskusstvo kino* 5 (2007): 5-14, 10.

⁶⁷¹ See Chapter Two for a full analysis of Kitchner’s story.

⁶⁷² Although there are virtually no uprisings in the early period of the Gulag, there was a string of several rebellions in 1953-54 following Stalin’s death. See Stephen A. Barnes, “In a Manner Befitting Soviet Citizens: An Uprising in the Post-Stalin Gulag,” *Slavic Review* 4 (2005): 823-50.

presence of RUR (*rota usilennogo rezhima*), a type of special punishment zone in which recalcitrant prisoners were housed. These prisoners, most of whom flatly refused to work in any capacity, were a significant number: one memoir estimates about 750 people in the “stable” (*koniushnia*) section of RUR, which represented only one barrack.⁶⁷³ These intractable prisoners were frightening even to other hardened criminals, who noted their savage cruelty. Since the inhabitants of RUR were not working, their food ration was much smaller, and the prisoners would steal and fight for one another’s portions, often killing or maiming one another.⁶⁷⁴

In her autobiography, the *udarnitsa* Elena Il’ichna recalled fewer prisoners in RUR—286, to be exact—and claims that the *pakhan* (crime-boss) played an important role in discouraging the prisoners from working. Her role as an educator-reformer was to convince the prisoners to begin participating in the Canal’s construction. When they asked for bread, she gave them bread. Once they had bread, they asked her for tobacco.⁶⁷⁵ Despite their recalcitrance, Elena’s reading of an official order out loud to the RUR inhabitants supposedly inspired them to finally begin working;⁶⁷⁶ nevertheless, the violence and aggression within the isolated compound seems more believable and pervasive than their dramatic turnarounds. In addition to the presence of RUR, periodic *chistki* (purges) of the work collectives demonstrates the presence and threat of unruly prisoners, even within the supposedly law-abiding organizations of labor brigades.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷³ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 31, l. 48.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁵ GARF, f. 7952, op. 7, d. 30, l. 3.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid, l. 4.

⁶⁷⁷ RGALI, f. 1885, op. 3, d. 47, l. 104. The specific infractions and even percentages are given in the documentation of the proverka of the labor collectives. Prisoners were excluded for the following reasons: counter-revolutionary crimes (278 prisoners, 29.6%), the violation of rules (222 prisoners, 25.2%), bad relationship to production (210 prisoners, 23%), the violation of camp order (220 prisoners, 22.2%).

While there may be a tendency to view the categories of official and non-official in Soviet culture as two entirely separate realms, the fact that the regime's subjects so often perform according to the script of the administration indicates that there was more cross-over between the oppressor and oppressed than might first be imagined. This actual hybridity explains the reason why so many of the non-prisoner and prisoner texts—and even the contemporary works regarding the Canal—exhibit similarities.⁶⁷⁸ One of the goals of this research has been to dissolve the strict boundaries that have always existed between official and non-official just as it has been to attenuate the discord between criminal and political prisoners. Although traditionally at odds with each other morally and ideologically, these two groups had more interaction at the White Sea-Baltic Canal than is the case in later Gulag projects.

5.3 LEGACY OF THE GULAG

The penal philosophy pursued during the construction of Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal was highly ideological, as only the acceptance of socialist tenets assured a prisoner's full rehabilitation. Although bodies were transformed during the process of *perekovka*, the real target was the soul. This soul, in turn, replaced the body as a new site of struggle for power; as Michel Foucault asserts, "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body."⁶⁷⁹ Punishment was a "complex social power" that expressed political

⁶⁷⁸ In another example of the Belomorkanal's rather advanced and developed cultural atmosphere, this blurring of official and non-official categories mirrors the approach of Moscow conceptualist artists who, rather than entirely rejecting official propaganda and state symbols, instead incorporate them into their artworks, similar to the contemporary artworks discussed in Chapter Four.

⁶⁷⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30.

ideals and human technology.⁶⁸⁰ The prison camp, therefore, was a vital political space—a laboratory or utopia—where societal notions could be tested. Some scholars acknowledge the significant role of the *zona* in contemporary Russian culture, even going as far to claim that society itself has been re-created according to the laws of the prison camp.⁶⁸¹ The political atmosphere on the “outside” often mirrored the climate on the “inside” in significant ways. There are similarities, in turn, between the tasks of the Cultural-Educational Department in the camps and the Communist Party’s upper crust. In the surveillance and implementation of Soviet culture, both work in conjunction with state security organs in order to promote official artistic doctrine.⁶⁸² While linguistic influence from the camps on society in general is perhaps the most thoroughly studied aspect of the Gulag’s impact on Russian life, there are many other elements of prison life that have permeated Russian culture.

Artistic participation played a crucial role in the Soviet prison camps: “In the Gulag, an artist’s creative drive, which can be likened to the will to live, helped preserve what the totalitarian system zealously sought to erase from everyone’s mind: individuality, spirituality, defiance of authoritarian prescriptions.”⁶⁸³ In many instances at the Belomorkanal, political prisoners used the camp environment to further their own intellectual projects in some way: Dvorzhetskii was pleased to find a genuine, operating theater; Losev continued his philosophical inquiries; Losev’s wife found comfort in drawing; Terent’ev helped to invent new, avant-garde theatrical art forms; Shumovskii took advantage of the diverse population to study different

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, 23-24.

⁶⁸¹ Khapaeva, 384-85. Artistic works—such as Andrei Tarkvoskii’s 1979 film *Stalker*—tend to confirm this tendency; in the science-fiction movie, three main characters explore a fictional territory called the *zona* (prison) that is guarded by police, surrounded with barbed wire, and is referred to as a “meat grinder” (*miasorubka*), another popular slang term for the Gulag in Russian.

⁶⁸² *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa*, 16.

⁶⁸³ «Лагерное творчество сродни жажде жизни, оно помогало сохранить то, что тоталитарная система старательно истребляла в личности индивидуальность, духовность, противостояние диктату.» *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa*, 14.

languages; Antsiferov transformed his historical skills into geological ones. Mikhail Shebarshin, a well-known mathematician and master chess player who was sentenced to ten years in prison under article 58, continued to play chess at the construction of the Belomorkanal and even participated in championships in Medvezh'egorsk.⁶⁸⁴ Both the political and criminal prisoners took part in cultural and intellectual projects at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and they did so in order to survive.⁶⁸⁵

For criminal prisoners, learning to read or write not only meant the potential of a new profession but also a way to earn privileges and esteem from the regime. In addition, each respective group (criminals and politicals) took previously-acquired skills and applied them to new circumstances: the shrewdness of the thieves allowed them to underscore their observational abilities or evade responsibility altogether by taking advantage of their privileged position vis-à-vis the political prisoners; the intellectuality of the political prisoners spurred them to form their own type of cultural life at the Belomorkanal and interpret their experiences more philosophically. In the Gulag more generally, prisoners used their ingenuity to maintain a certain level of artistic activity—for a theater production, prisoners used fishing nets to imitate lace and cotton wool for wigs; for painting, prisoners transformed pig's blood into paint, mixing pigments with oatmeal for hardening.⁶⁸⁶ Life, with all of its complexities, continued even in a realm characterized by death.

The degree of artistic participation in the camps alternately served the regime and aided in individual prisoners' endurance, demonstrating the multifarious possibilities for aesthetic

⁶⁸⁴ Sergei Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit* (Moscow: Olimpiia, 2004), 206-7. The author notes that the regime at the Belomorkanal in the early 1930s was relatively soft, allowing for the ability to participate in chess championships, despite being in a prison camp. Shebarshin was freed early because of his *udarnik* labor, and he lived in Medvezh'egorsk in free exile, where he worked as a math teacher at the local school.

⁶⁸⁵ Although not a "necessity," like food, shelter, or water, the political prisoners all note to one degree or another that art and intellectual inquiry was essential for their existence.

⁶⁸⁶ *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa*, 14.

involvement in the prison camps. This artistic component of the camp experience is also imperative to the contemporary researcher, as the texts produced by such creative efforts now serve as materials for scholarly inquiry. In this way, art is linked directly to memory. Memory is perhaps the most controversial and challenging aspect of the legacy of the Gulag—in what way should the camps be commemorated? How does one make sense of the decided lack of Gulag memorials and how should this lack of interest be addressed? Sergei Kovalev, a human rights activist and former political prisoner, claims that the absence of memory is precisely the most disturbing aspect of the Gulag's legacy:

We're taught amnesia in school today, just as we were in Soviet times. Rancor grows all by itself like a weed. And there's no place for intelligent memory, that is, experience, to enrich itself. We have all forgotten but we haven't learned anything. That's why we keep pointlessly tripping over old mounds, constantly stepping on notorious rakes. Lovingly puffing away on 'Belomor' cigarettes, we somehow fail to notice that Germans don't have cigarettes called Dachau.⁶⁸⁷

The distinction between Holocaust and Gulag memorials as well as my argument for the significance of Belomor cigarettes has already been discussed in Chapter Four. More important here is the sense of amnesia that is so often described when attempting to come to terms with the Soviet Union's bloody history. This absence of memory is fueled in large part by the lack of a usable past. If one tries to limit oneself to the Great Terror as the horrific event in Soviet history, it soon becomes clear that collectivization and multiple famines must also be included. Then the

⁶⁸⁷ «Амнезии в школе учат, что прежде, что теперь. Злопамятность – как сорняк – сама растет. А вот умной памятьливостью, то есть опытом, разжиться негде. Мы все забыли, но ничему не научились. Потому и спотыкаемся почем зря о старые кочки, да поминутно наступаем на пресловутые грабли. И, любовно попыхивая «Беломором,» почему-то совершенно не обращаем внимания на то, что у немцев нет сигарет «Дахау.» Introduction by Sergei Kovalev, *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa*, 1.

struggles with internal opposition and the oppression of the post-war period become apparent. Then the suppression of religion, non-communist parties, and the dissidents of the 1960s-1980s must be remembered.⁶⁸⁸ In the end, no patch of the Soviet past is safe. In realizing the impossibility of locating a usable past, it becomes easier simply to forget the past altogether.⁶⁸⁹

Yet to presume that the simple erection of monuments or dedication of memorials would somehow preserve the gruesomeness of the Soviet past from the dustbin of history would also be misguided. As James Young notes, “once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.”⁶⁹⁰ In Warsaw, I had a personal experience of this very phenomenon. Searching for the last remaining remnants of the infamous ghetto wall—now located within the courtyard of a private apartment complex—I stumbled upon two young Polish boys who clearly guessed my purpose, my walking map making evident my intentions. They began screaming “ghetto, ghetto!” (*getto, getto*) from across the street just as I was realizing that there was no possible entry at the house number where the memorial was located. I nodded and they called up to a neighbor to unlock the apartment building’s gate. While I was pleasantly surprised by their generosity and willingness to help (one of the boys even walked me to an additional memorial located several blocks away), I was somewhat disturbed by their carefree alacrity in showing me what were monuments to essentially an extinct people in their country. As I tried to photograph one of the fragments of the ghetto walls, the boys cheerfully jumped into my picture, hopping on each other’s backs and smiling (Figure 13). When I asked one of the boys if he learned about the Holocaust in school, he simply stared at me

⁶⁸⁸ Aleksandr Daniel', “Tema GULAGa. Znachimoe otsutstvie,” *Iskusstvo kino* 5 (2007): 5-14, 8.

⁶⁸⁹ Or, perhaps, remember only a particular sliver of it—World War II, which continues to be memorialized with great fanfare in present-day Russia. See Chapter Four.

⁶⁹⁰ James Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 267-96, 273.



Figure 13: Last fragment of ghetto wall in Warsaw, Poland. Photograph by author.

with a blank expression, mumbling that it might come later. Despite a physical reminder in these children's own backyard—complete with a commemorative, explanatory tablet—of what was a horrific, deadly event, the presence of a memorial seemed to almost facilitate the evasion of memory rather than its preservation. As what Pierre Nora would call a “lieu de mémoire,” such monuments are an attempt to replace the now absent phenomenon of spontaneous memory with an institutional replacement.⁶⁹¹ Perhaps the development of “anti-monuments,” therefore, becomes more appropriate for our contemporary society.⁶⁹²

Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, there are some gestures towards remembering in Russia today. While I was conducting research at the Memorial society in St. Petersburg,

⁶⁹¹ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 12.

⁶⁹² For a discussion of different types of anti-monuments and their uses, see James Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 267-96, 273.

numerous survivors of the prison camps pressed into my hands their self-published memoirs, determined to maintain a record of their experiences in writing. The Gulag is becoming a popular topic of research among both Russian and Western scholars, and there are many archival resources now available to those who would like to investigate further.⁶⁹³ New memorials and dedications are being added to the mass killing site of Sandermokh in Karelia (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Monument to Ukrainians killed at Sandermokh. Photograph by author.

During a 2007 visit, my Ukrainian guide proudly showed me a recently placed memorial to his fellow countrymen while an eerie silence reigned over the strangely peaceful place that had once been the site of so much violence. The many makeshift crosses, plastic flowers, and personal photographs coalesced before me like an unexpected surprise in the silent pine forest (Figure 15).

⁶⁹³ Nevertheless, the highest security level documents still remain unavailable, and several historians I met in Russia were worried that access to all archives would again be restricted, encouraging me to collect as much material as I could when it was available.



Figure 15: Crosses at the killing field of Sandermokh. Photograph by author.

The small road to the memorial area was barely navigable and showed no signs of tourism, and my driver informed me that the small chapel at the site had recently been vandalized.

The attempts to preserve historical legacy, therefore, must be accompanied by qualifications; memory of the Gulag in Russia today is a complicated affair. Many have difficulty discussing the Gulag for any extended period of time or simply do not want to discuss

it at all. When I interviewed one of the directors of a contemporary documentary film regarding the history of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, she preferred to discuss her experiences as a child during the siege of Leningrad and the difficulties of living as a retired person in Russia today rather than the topic of the film itself.⁶⁹⁴ While many have criticized the existence of Belomorkanal cigarettes as disrespectful, an important Belomorkanal researcher, Iurii Dmitriev—who has the unenviable task of exhuming human bones from the construction site in an attempt to tally the victims—himself is a proud smoker of Belomorkanal cigarettes. When I asked him about the significance of the brand, he quickly fetched an entire garbage bag full of the empty cigarette packs, clearly saving them for some unspecified reason.

Teodor Shumovskii, a former prisoner who worked for a month and a half felling trees near the White Sea-Baltic Canal, refused to acknowledge that he was incarcerated during our conversation together. Despite the fact that he had written his memoirs and is well known within the Memorial organization, he could not call himself a prisoner nor refer to his forest worker position as anything other than his job. When asked about some of the more ideological aspects of the Canal project, he insisted that his specialty was scholarship and not politics and that he had no interest in discussing his experience as a specifically penal one. Instead, with an absolutely incredible memory for a man of some ninety-eight years, he detailed the people he met, the research he pursued, and the foreign words he learned while working as a lumberjack.⁶⁹⁵

The phrase Shumovskii repeated most often during our interview was Moscow as the “port of five seas.”⁶⁹⁶ The White Sea-Baltic Canal was important not just unto itself, but rather within this larger framework. It was one piece of a puzzle that, once connected with other

⁶⁹⁴ Zoia Smirnova-Toropova, conversation with author, 8 March 2007.

⁶⁹⁵ Teodor Shumovskii, conversation with author, 18 February 2007.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

waterways, could facilitate an even greater economic significance for the capital city of Moscow and, in turn, for the Soviet Union as a whole. The assemblage, therefore, did not end with the completion of the Belomorkanal's construction; it was to join other pieces to become an even more momentous cultural and industrial project for socialism as a whole. Although this research is primarily a case study, placing at its center a project that took a mere twenty months to complete within the framework of a more than seventy-year long regime, the Canal continuously implied more than itself, acting both as a harbinger for what was to come and a representation of what had passed in the Soviet Union.

Even more than the physical construction of the Canal, its criminal component reverberates not just with the Soviet experience but with Russian culture as a whole. A fascination with the transgression of law might be seen as a common obsession in Russia. The country's most famous novel, Fedor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), follows the footsteps of a murderous criminal; the imprisonment of the Decembrists in the Tsarist regime foreshadows the incarceration of the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union; contemporary films and television programs in Russia often highlight or glorify the criminal world. Each episode of the popular Russian television serial *The Prison* (*Zona*) opens with the following statement by the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovskii: "Prison is not an area; it's a testing ground in which man either remains standing or is broken. Whether or not a man remains standing depends on his own feeling of personal worth, his ability to distinguish what is important."⁶⁹⁷ The significance of "remaining human" is imperative in the camps, and many Gulag survivors note it as the key to survival. It is precisely this aspect of personal trial that

⁶⁹⁷ «Зона – это не территория, это та проверка, в результате которой человек может либо выстоять, либо сломаться. Выстоит ли человек – зависит от его чувства собственного достоинства, его способности различать главное и приходящее.»

allows some former inmates to interpret their incarceration as an important experience that they do not lament. As one of my research contacts explained to me, his time in the camps allowed him to learn more about himself, his limits and abilities, and in the end made him a stronger person, leading him to claim that no prisoner regrets his time spent in jail.⁶⁹⁸ Perhaps it is the Russian tendency to valorize suffering that allows for such attitudes among former prisoners, as the experience of struggle and injustice can be portrayed as a dignifying and transformational force.

The historical and artistic examples of imprisonment in Russia are matched by a series of real-life, high-profile arrests of such figures as the oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovskii and the anti-Putin chess champion Gary Kasparov, as well as by lesser-known operations of Russian law enforcement—for example, the 2008 police raid of the Memorial human rights organization in St. Petersburg where I had conducted my research. Additionally, the spaces of prisons themselves are significant as components of the Russian cultural landscape. Monasteries have been transformed into prisons and then back into monasteries. The name of one of the most infamous prisons in Moscow, Lubianka, still sends shivers down the spine yet now has a memorial site nearby. Visitors can tour the infamous “Crosses” Prison (*Kresty*) in St. Petersburg with a guide; and there has even been discussion of turning former camp sites into profit makers, recasting them as amusement parks where tourists have the opportunity to spend the night in a prison-turned-hotel.⁶⁹⁹ In addition, the struggle to contain crime and corruption continues to represent one of the largest challenges Russia faces today.⁷⁰⁰ The continued relevance of the

⁶⁹⁸ Viacheslav Dalinin, interview with author, 2 February 2007.

⁶⁹⁹ The recent film *Soviet Era Park* (*Park Sovetskogo Perioda*), mentioned in Chapter Four, parodies this phenomenon.

⁷⁰⁰ Robert W. Orttung and Anthony Latta, eds., *Russia's Battle with Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

prison experience in contemporary culture helps to explain why it is more important than ever to continue to address, explore, and analyze the legacy of the Gulag.

In Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* (*Kotlovan*, 1930)—written at the time that Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal was being built—the main character Voshchev muses, “Don't people get to feel smaller as their buildings get bigger? [...] We put up houses and then fall apart ourselves. Who'll be left to go on living?”⁷⁰¹ The proletarian workers in Platonov's novel, ironically, had to dig down in order to go up. As the Belomorkanal waterway grew larger, it engulfed more lives, both literally and metaphorically. The prisoners—praised for their commitment to socialist labor—became subsumed to the collective, toiling whole. The Canal was an immense body of work, and both nature and man were sacrificed for its realization as an industrial project and aesthetic laboratory. Self and society were re-created on the banks of the Canal in a transformative process that included art as a key motivational factor and end result. Yet in the face of supposed creation was destruction; re-birth was accompanied by large-scale death. The utopian future became a dystopian reality. Although this absurdity seems to deny the possibility of rational interpretation, it is precisely this feature of the Belomorkanal's history that most adeptly summarizes the experience: like in a ritualistic process, the old was destroyed in order to make way for the new, and the two opposites seemed inevitably to accompany each other.⁷⁰² Such an apparent incongruity, therefore, is not at all nonsensical. It exemplifies the ideological work occurring at the Canal's construction. It resonates and reverberates within Stalinist—and even Soviet—culture as a whole.

⁷⁰¹ Andrey Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, trans. Robert Chandler and Geoffrey Smith (London: Harvill P, 1996), 11.

⁷⁰² Despite the opposition between birth and death, the two episodes share commonalities as integral life moments that must be accompanied by specific rituals. See Chapters One and Two for a further explication of the importance of birth and death in ritualistic processes.

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